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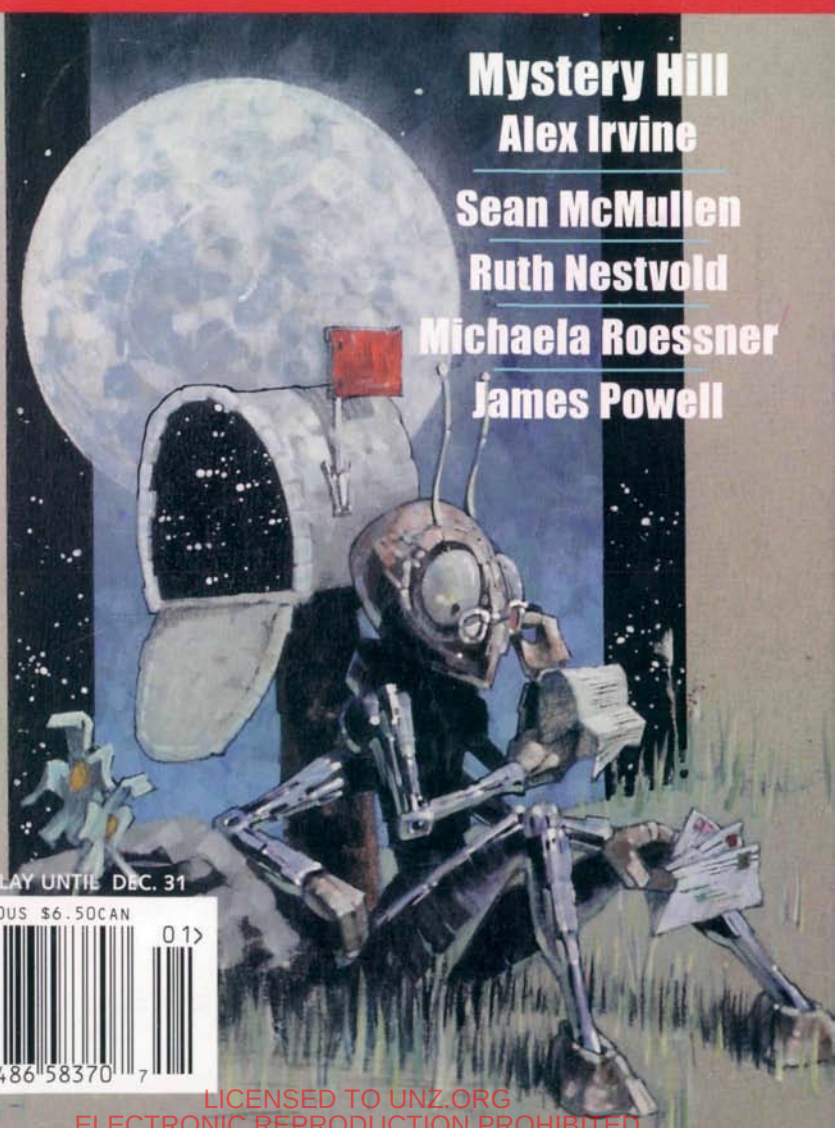

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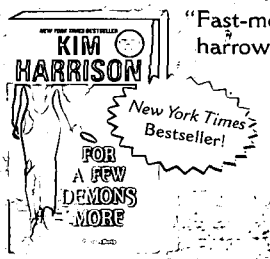

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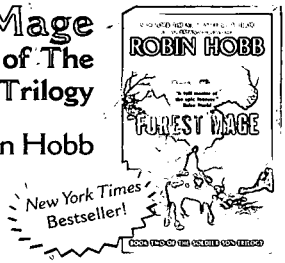

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THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy&ScienceFiction
January • 59th Year of Publication

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COVER: "HYPERMAIL" BY DARREL ANDERSON

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The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction (ISSN 1095-8258), Volume 114, No. 1, Whole No. 668, January 2008. Published monthly except for a combined October/November issue by Spilogale, Inc. at $4.50 per copy. Annual subscription $50.99; $62.99 outside of the U.S. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy & Science Fiction, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. Publication office, 105 Leonard St., Jersey City, NJ 07307. Periodical postage paid at Jersey City, NJ 07307, and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A.
Copyright © 2007 by Spilogale, Inc. All rights reserved.
Distributed by Curtis Circulation Co., 730 River Rd. New Milford, NJ 07646.
GENERAL AND EDITORIAL OFFICE: PO BOX 3447, HOBOKEN, NJ 07030
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Sean McMullen is the author of about a dozen novels, the most recent of which is Before the Storm. *Here he brings us a gritty tale of life in Albion in the sixth century. Mr. McMullen tells us that in the mid-530s, the volcano Krakatoa exploded, blanketing the world in dust and giving Europe a year without a summer. He says also that it occurred to him that if the temptation to tell stories of a British warlord named Arthur is strong now, imagine how much stronger it must have been to storytellers back then!*

The Twilight Year

By Sean McMullen

THE OVERGROWN RUINS had been built at the height of the Roman Empire's power, yet they were still imposing after centuries of neglect. A rough-hewn Christian cross stood atop the tallest surviving column, marking the place as shrine, where sanctuary, rest, and prayer could be found in the wilderness. I arrived late in the evening and found the priest, Oswald, alone. We took an instant dislike to each other.

"Why do you bards sing of Arturian, but never Christ?" muttered Oswald, snapping twigs for the small fire outside his hovel.

"Because you priests never sing of Arturian," I replied.

Without looking up from his pile of twigs, Oswald said, "The sun is nearly down, go to sleep."

"But I have a fire, a harp, and an audience. I'll charm your soul with a ballad."

"More likely you'll play so badly that even outlaws would flee this place."

I was tuning a small harp that I had built myself. It was just a stout

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triangle of oak, ten gut strings, and ashwood pegs. I brushed the strings softly, as anxious not to mask the tread of approaching feet as to hear the notes. Suddenly a dead rabbit was tossed onto the ruddy snow beside our tiny fire.

Oswald and I bounded to our feet, axe and quarterstaff raised. A graying but well-muscled man walked into the field of the fire's glow, his arms folded and his shield slung over his back.

"Had I meant harm, you would both already be dead," he announced.

"Then welcome," said Oswald, still wary. "I am Oswald. My chapel offers shelter, prayer — "

"And good music," I interjected.

"I watch over my guests as they rest," sighed Oswald, waving a hand in my direction, "although the devil is tempting me to strangle that one."

We sat down together. The newcomer was clearly a warrior, but neatly groomed and well spoken, unlike those who live as outlaws. I exchanged glances with the priest, then picked up my harp and brushed the snow from it.

"I saw several bodies two miles south of here, at Newberry Hill," the newcomer said as he began to skin his rabbit.

"Dangerous times," was my thought on the subject.

"You should be more vigilant," he advised.

"Had the bard not been jangling his harp, I'd have heard you approaching," said the priest smoothly, his chest puffed out in triumph.

"Just now you said my playing would drive outlaws away."

"Bard," the stranger asked, "is your harp damaged?"

"It's built for strength," I replied, pointing to two deep grooves in the wood. "It has been on my back through five battles, and has taken blows meant for me."

"More likely they just wanted to stop your playing," said the priest.

"I have been traveling here and there," I explained, ignoring him. "I am a bard. I compose ballads about the doings of warlords."

"Ballads about warlords that are paid for by warlords are all the same," said the priest. "They slay a hundred of the enemy in every battle, drink enough for ten of their companions, are stronger than their own horse, but alas, are not as intelligent."

"I am further embellishing my ballad about the mighty Arturian. He

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and a dozen companions recently defeated a thousand Saxons at the battle of Newberry Hill. Three hundred of the enemy were slain and their king was captured."

"The fight at Newberry Hill?" scoffed Oswald. "My last guest said nothing about Arturian being there. Nine Saxons died, five escaped, and a chieftain named Dermerrius the Rank is holding the Saxon warlord for a ransom of twelve sheep!"

"Er, and I only saw nine bodies," added the stranger.

"If my ballad says that Arturian won, then Arturian won," I said firmly. "Some people do not appreciate poetic license."

"Dermerrius is a fine warrior," began the stranger.

"Arturian roams the woodlands, robbing the rich and degenerate, and giving to the poor," I proclaimed, strumming my harp. "That's in my ballad, too."

"I'm poor," said the priest, poking a finger through a hole in his cloak. "He's never given me anything."

The stranger skewered the rabbit with a sharpened stick and began to roast it over the fire. By now we had grown less suspicious of him, because a man cooking with skill is never considered to be a dangerous man.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Valcian," he replied without either looking up or demanding to know my name.

"So, how come you to be about and alone in such dangerous parts?" asked the priest.

"All parts are dangerous, and we all must be somewhere."

"Pah, true, it's the times that makes the danger. There are great portents in the sky. The very sun itself is fading, noon is like twilight, and look at that sunset! Red as blood. Even the snow falls red from the clouds."

"Snow of any sort in July is a novelty," I added.

"The snow is mixed with fine red dust," Valcian pointed out. "Perhaps a storm raised it from a distant desert, or a volcano blasted it into the winds."

"To me it resembles blood," said the priest.

"It is gritty between the teeth, unlike blood."

"A portent is a portent!" the priest snapped. "The snow still *looks* like frozen blood, it doesn't have to *be* blood. The summer is chill, so the

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winter's to be freezing. Mark my words, there will be famine. The Empire of Rome will fall."

"The Empire fell a century ago," said Valcian.

"There's bits of the Empire left," the priest pointed out. "They'll fall."

"Oh I agree, and they're the very last fragments," I said as I stood up and played a few introductory notes on my harp.

"Play that thing again and you're a dead man," warned the priest as he fed more twigs into the fire.

"The end of the Roman Empire! Could a bard ask for anything better than to chronicle the downfall of the mightiest empire in all the world's history?"

"The world falls apart, but for you it's an excuse for a song."

"An excuse for a *ballad*, if you please. The most mighty of empires falls, blood rains from the sky, the countryside descends into lawless chaos, and into this land wracked by nightmares comes — "

"A plague of bards to sing about it!" cried Oswald, sounding as if his patience had run dangerously low. "That's enough. No more."

It was five hundred and thirty-five years since the birth of Christ, at least by the reckoning of the scholar Dionysius. The original Roman Empire had fissured into eastern and western parts a century and a half earlier, then Rome had fallen, and fallen again, and fallen yet again. There were now dozens of princelings claiming the title of the western Emperor of Rome. Emperor Honorius had withdrawn the last legions from Britannia when Rome first fell, and since then the rich Roman farmers refused to pay taxes, saying that they got nothing in return. They had retreated to their estates, raised private garrisons, and settled down to live in great luxury amid the gathering chaos.

All around the great estates, the towns and cities decayed as the common folk plundered the abandoned Roman buildings for timber and stone to build their hovels. The Roman farmers traded with each other, and with the Saxon and Briton tribes. What little order there was outside the estates came from the forces of local warlords. Nevertheless, there were many who believed that the Roman Empire still existed.

"The rabbit is done, gentlemen," Valcian announced presently. "Who is for a share?"

The scent of good food did its predictable work. Valcian was soon

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telling stories from Rome for the benefit of Oswald, and teaching me a few Roman tunes.

"So, Rome's still a great empire?" asked the priest as Valcian finished a dance tune.

"Well, it is...different. The Eastern Empire is strong and is expanding. It now holds much of Africa's north coast."

"But who is actually emperor in Rome?" I asked.

"There is no emperor as such."

"So the whole place is away to the hounds?" said the priest.

"The Western Empire is ruled by bishops, more or less."

"Then the Western Empire really is away to the hounds, the bishops rule nothing here. Can't spit without hitting a Saxon pagan. What's your business here?"

"I want to visit the lord of a great estate, Quintus Flavorius."

"Quintus Flavorius!" exclaimed the priest. "There's heathen worship on his estate. They worship the old gods. Jupiter, Apollo, Venus! All those statues showing their bums, titties and, and thighs, and...." For a moment an expression of longing softened the priest's face, but he suddenly snapped out of his reverie. "Well, you never see Christian statues showing all that!" he concluded, crossing himself.

"More's the pity," I said.

"Hear that?" demanded the priest. "He's another one! He works for the likes of Quintus Flavorius."

"Do you really?" asked Valcian. "Can you take me to him?"

"Why, yes! I am on my way to charm his company with music."

"He makes up lewd songs about adultery, fornication, obscene excesses, and forbidden lovemaking. Those degenerate, pagan Romans pay good silver for that sort of thing!"

"I would pay you to take me to his estate," Valcian said to me. "Conditions are so confused hereabouts."

"The journey will take less than a day," I replied.

"What's your business with him?" asked the priest suspiciously.

"The restoration of Roman law, the collection of taxes, and the defense of the land."

"Strange, at first glance you didn't look like a fool," the priest said with a laugh.

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* * *

Although he had a horse, Valcian walked beside me as we set off the following morning. He was of a mind to learn as much as he could about Quintus and his estate before we arrived, and because it is my trade to talk and sing, I talked as much as he wished.

"This really is the age for bards," I said to my new companion as we warily followed a track that was no more than a ribbon of countryside where the ruddy snow had been trampled down. "There are rich, idle lords of estates who want to hear songs of dalliance and revelry, warlords who want me to sing of their deeds of arms, and grubby villagers who want to hear anything by anyone who has come from further away than ten miles."

"Do you never feel threatened?" he asked.

"Continually, but I have nothing of value upon my person and I am armed. I am a very poor prospect when it comes to easy loot."

"Easy loot." He laughed. "Surely the estate of Quintus Flavorius is just that?"

"The Roman has two score cavalry, and twice that number of men on foot with spears and bows."

"Impressive numbers. How does he keep them loyal?"

"By being Roman. While all else around them is in chaos, his estate prevails. It grows a surplus of grain and meat for trade, and provides luxuries and pastimes that cannot be had elsewhere."

"Indeed?"

"Oh yes. Within the villa's walls the guests favored by Quintus may sleep in heated rooms under tiled roofs that do not leak when it rains, and there drink wine, eat fine food, make sport with ladies of pleasure, and...well, you are sure to see the rest for yourself. It draws surprising goodwill from the chieftains and warlords hereabouts."

"It cannot last."

"But for now it is lasting, so Quintus has backing."

"I have heard that Arturian and his riders have burned many Roman estates, and that he is bent upon scrubbing the last trace of Roman rule from the land."

"Oh aye, I can sing you a ballad — "

"Later, but for now can you tell me *why* Arturian would hold such a

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grudge against Romans? There have not been Roman troops in Britannia for over a hundred years, and it is decades since a Roman ruled anything larger than a farm in this land."

"If you want an answer, you must listen to a story."

"Spoken like a true bard. Go on."

"Say that a man kills your father and ravishes your mother when you are just a boy. Thirty years later you are in your prime, and you come upon the fellow. He is fifty, and has mellowed and prospered, he even has a large family that loves him. Would you have your vengeance, and kill him?"

"Of course."

"What about when he is seventy, and growing frail?"

"The crime still stands."

"Ninety? He's drooling into his gruel, not even able to recall the crime? You are dead, but your son comes upon him?"

"He must still die, it is a matter of justice."

"Say the man has lived one hundred summers. He is on his deathbed, just days from slipping into the afterlife? Your grandson chances to be there. Should he kill the miscreant?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" barked Valcian, suddenly displaying considerable emotion.

I have always been good at raising emotions in my audiences, and I never cease to practice.

"Why?" I asked simply, having found his measure.

"Others must be shown that time does not diminish guilt."

"Now then, change your grandson's name to Arturian, the felon's name to Rome, your mother's name to Britannia, and the length of time to just shy of five hundred years."

Valcian did not answer at once. It was a sure sign that I had made my point.

"The killing of a felon in his dotage is not a valid comparison," he finally decided. "Who could burn with hatred for deeds done fifteen generations ago? Could you?"

"Ah, but I am not Arturian. I am a mere bard."

"Have you met him?"

"Alas, no."

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"I should like to meet him."

"Then I pray that you find him while I am with you," I said brightly.

WE REACHED THE EDGE of some tidily cultivated fields, and in the distance could see white walls and buildings standing out against the red snow. A tall and sturdy lookout tower made of timber dominated the estate, however, reminding everyone that Roman rule was strong, skilled, and all-seeing. Slaves were at work, scraping snow aside so that the sheep could find grass, and guards mingled with them, alert for raiders.

We were quickly noticed and intercepted by a squad of horsemen. I established my identity by showing that I could play my harp, while Valcian was pressed on all sides with questions about the world beyond Britannia. Presently we were escorted into the presence of Quintus, who wore a clean, white toga and was groomed to perfection.

"I do not use the title warlord," he declared proudly once Valcian and I had introduced ourselves. "I am a noble of Rome, and there is an end to it."

"You must admit that Rome is not what it used to be," Valcian pointed out.

"Ah, but Rome lives on, do you not see?" Quintus replied, turning about where he stood and gesturing all around him. "This estate is Rome."

"This estate is but a mile square."

"What is Rome if not organization, and we nobles of Britannia are organized. We grow more than we eat, have our own garrisons, and provide stability. People want stability. I command five dozen cavalry, foot and archers. They have the arms and armor of the legions of Rome, and are among the best equipped in all of Britannia."

"From what I saw, their arms and armor are at least two hundred years old," Valcian observed.

"Like the roads of the Romans, they were built to last," I quipped.

"But don't you see, they are *Roman*," insisted Quintus. "The barbarians cannot even count past the number of their fingers and toes, what do they know of two hundred years? I parade my men in the surrounding villages a couple of times a year, and always kill a few hairy and unwashed layabouts after dressing them up in barbarian guise."

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"Ah, to what aim?"

"*Panem et circenses*, my boy, and the *pax romana*."

"I can understand the estate providing bread and the peace of Rome, but how do you manage the circuses?"

"I proclaim that yet another barbarian warlord has been humbled, and after the wretch has been given a mild sleeping potion, I set him against the best of my own guardsmen in a fight to the death. The villagers get a show, and are left in awe of the might of my supposedly Roman warriors. Where did you say you were from?"

"Why, the Empire of Rome," said Valcian.

"The Empire of Rome, you say?" asked Quintus. "But as you said, the Roman Empire is not what it used to be. What city are you from?"

"Constantinople."

"Ah, I see, the *Eastern* Roman Empire."

"The Byzantine Empire," I added.

"Indeed, yet still the Empire," said Valcian.

"Are you a Christian, Valcian?" Quintus asked suspiciously.

"I am."

This made Quintus scowl with displeasure. "We here worship the gods that made Rome great and strong. The Christians sapped its strength. What is your business here?"

"We are looking for allies. Our intention is reunification. Why, at this moment the great general Belisarius is waging war against the Ostrogoths on the Italian peninsula. It is seldom admitted by the wise and powerful, but the intention of Emperor Justinian is to win back the entire Roman Empire of old."

"Win back the empire?" said Quintus. "For that you would also have to fight the Vandals, Berbers, Visigoths, Sueves, Franks, Celts, Burgundians, Gephids, and Saxons!"

"You forgot the Lombards," said Valcian, his face held firmly blank.

"Oh yes, how careless of me. So, Lord Valcian, what brings you here specifically?"

"To persuade such men as you to pay fealty to Justinian."

"This sounds suspiciously like a poor joke."

"Joke it is certainly not. Just think, an ally of Emperor Justinian on the northern borders of the Franks. They would be reluctant to ally

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themselves with the Ostrogoths opposing us in Italy if they knew that the Eastern Roman Empire had an army of two thousand Britons — "

"Raise an army of two thousands?" spluttered Quintus. "You are talking to a farmer with but sixty men bearing arms! Most of those are Briton field hands and artisans when I'm not parading them."

"But Lord Quintus, there are many small forces such as yours throughout the southeast of Britannia. United, you could form a very impressive army."

"Very astute of you, sir, but who will defend our estates with the warriors gone? While my men plunder the Franks, the local villagers will plunder my villa."

"Emperor Justinian is aware of that. He has charged me to propose that should the lords of Britannia donate one man in three of their forces, he will match them man for man. That would amount to a formidable army if all kingdoms, estates, and warlords contributed. He is prepared to garrison some of the old Roman fortresses with his warriors, and — "

"*Byzantine* warriors, on *our* island, in *forts*?" cried Quintus, aghast and reaching for his wine. "Oh no no no, sir! Absolutely not!"

"Not Byzantine, but — "

"Byzantine they certainly are, sir. Let us cast aside silly pretensions and be honest. Yours is not the Roman Empire of olden times. The Eastern Roman Empire is really the Byzantine Empire, which is a *Christian* empire."

"But we would provide stability and keep order."

"Indeed sir, and very soon your emperor would be demanding that we must pay taxes for your upkeep. Before you know it, we would be having to pay for his wars and forced to raise yet more armies to fight in his name. Every time I tried to hold a private orgy his priests would be swarming into my villa, preaching hellfire and smashing my statues of the old gods. This villa is far more Roman than your empire, sir, and I intend to keep it that way."

"United we would be vastly stronger."

"And I would be paying taxes, wearing hairshirts, and confining my amorous exploits to a single wife! Absolutely not, Valcian, and that is my final word."

Valcian now sat back, smiling and waving his hand dismissively.

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"Quintus, Quintus, do you really believe all that about Christians? Take it from me, we seldom practice what we preach."

Quintus had sat forward, as if strings tied him to Valcian. He gave a knowing leer, yet suspicion was still in his features.

"In that case you would not decline an invitation to a revel, yes? There will be fine food, wine, song, and the exchange of bedmates. I could arrange it for this very night."

"Oh, I most certainly would not, but alas, I have no wife to contribute," replied Valcian.

"No matter, I have several. There also happen to be several other guests on my estate, enjoying delights of ancient Rome that my family has preserved for many generations."

"How discreet are you?" asked Valcian.

"Have no fears, word of what is done here never finds its way to Constantinople."

"I can see why Britannia's warlords allow such lingerings of Roman rule to survive."

"Ah yes, I am a master of political balance — but enough of all that. Tell me of court scandals and cuisine in Constantinople."

"I hardly know where to start," laughed Valcian, spreading his arms wide.

It was only now that Quintus remembered me.

"Bard, can you sing?" he demanded.

"I am a bard, my lord, so naturally — "

"Splendid, splendid! You shall perform for us tonight."

I spent much of the afternoon singing old Briton ballads to idle guards and slaves. They knew that Arturian had been burning Roman estates, so everyone wanted to hear of him, yet I insisted that I would only perform my great Arturian ballad late that night. At sunset a lavish feast began, with Valcian as the honored guest. Torches of mutton fat burned smokily while the guests reclined on cushions, drinking wine and mead while listening to the estate's poet read from the *Amores* of Ovid. Next, I got up with my harp and amused the company with songs of drinking to excess, adultery, and breaking wind. I was followed by a troupe of Briton women, who danced to the sound of drums and reedpipes while taking off their

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clothes in unison. With the dancing over, the main courses were paraded in by men in the guise of satyrs; that is to say they wore sheepskin trousers and rams' horns.

Quintus had more than two dozen guests and entertainers. Aside from myself and Valcian there were three chiefs of local villages, the lord's brother and sister, a visiting noble from the kingdom of Mercia, and two merchants from Wessex. Most of the guests had wives or companions, although none kept company with those they had escorted into the room. The dancers and servants made sure that nobody was wanting for a companion, and every so often a couple would slip away for a time while everyone else speculated upon what they might be doing. From time to time the guests would hurry out to vomit noisily, then return to consume yet more. Curiously, some servants had been stationed outside to cry out in Latin like street vendors. This was apparently meant to provide the illusion of being in Rome itself, centuries earlier. This was no mere orgy in Roman clothing; this was an experience of being Roman.

Presently I decided to have myself removed, so I chose to sing my ballad of Boudicia. When I began to sing of the Briton queen, and of how her daughters were ravished by order of the Roman invaders, Quintus and his guests were delighted, but once it became clear that I was presenting the event as a tragedy rather than a titillating comedy, the mood soured. Quintus ordered me ejected with no further ceremony.

As I picked myself up and checked my harp for damage, I was approached by a woman who introduced herself in barely comprehensible Latin as Elenede. We quickly switched to the common tongue, however, and she told me that she had liked my singing. She offered me a bite from a leg of roast duck, then she tossed it aside and guided my hand to one of her breasts.

"You may not be in the favor of Quintus, but I'm not Quintus and I fancy you," she declared in somewhat slurred speech. "The bed chambers are to the right, and they are heated."

"I, ah, you favor me for my music?" I mumbled impatiently.

"Aye, but I'd like a chance to favor you for more than that."

Embarrassed by her alarmingly easy familiarity, I withdrew my hand on the pretext of playing a tune for her. After that we began to talk of this and that, even though I was anxious to go into the fields and sing my ballad

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of Arturian to the waiting guards and slaves. I quickly noticed that Elenede made a point of asking me about myself, and made much of how important Valcian must be. In a more subtle fashion I coaxed her into talking about herself.

"Aye, I'm a Briton, but I feign well as a Roman, do you not think so?" she asked.

"Oh indeed, and where are you from?"

"A village to the north, two days by mule. I was the wife of the chief, but he died fighting the Saxons. I was sold to Quintus, and here I am, the mistress of a governor."

"A governor?" I asked with sudden interest. "As in Quintus Flavorius?"

"Aye. He says he's been to Rome, and he knows the emperor. He says he'll take me there one day. Have you been to Rome?"

"Oh, yes. Bards travel very far."

"Is Rome as Quintus says?"

"What does he say?"

"He says the streets are paved with gold, and the emperor likes women with such a face and figure as I have."

"Only the grand streets are paved with gold," I said diplomatically. "As for the emperor, I was too lowly to meet him."

"I think the emperor will bear me away to his bed as soon as he lays eyes upon me. He will be so charmed that he will marry me and make me empress. Then I shall have Quintus beheaded, because he is too rough when at dalliance."

"I was glad to be thrown out," I said as she unsteadily poured wine into goblets of green glass that were chipped and frosted with age. "I am in need of rest from the noise and babble."

"Oh! Well you'd best not be rough or I'll have you beheaded too," she laughed, taking the wrong meaning by reflex.

"No, no, first I have to sing to those outside. I promised them a ballad."

"So, what are you to sing about?" she asked with vague interest. "Quintus wants ditties of buttocks heaving and legs spreading, but your song of Boudicia was very moving. Will you sing it again?"

"No, this time I think I'll sing my ballad of Arturian, and of how he tried to rescue his wife from an evil Roman sorcerer."

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"His wife?" asked Elenede. "What is her name?"

"I do declare that she will be...Elenede."

"My name?" giggled Elenede.

"Don't you want to be the wife of the king Arturian?"

"I'd prefer to be an empress, but it would still be nice. What's the story?"

"It's a ballad. Come along and listen."

"Ballads are really long aren't they?" she asked, her tone suggesting that she did not like long ballads.

"Indeed."

"Longer than the story of Boudicia?"

"Much longer."

"It's cold out there."

"The Briton folk have a fire in the field behind their quarters."

"In the field, bard? That means under the sky and in the cold, fire or no fire."

"As you will, then," I said, turning away from her with no further ado and setting off down the path that bisected the courtyard.

BEFORE I REACHED the field I rubbed my hands in the dirt beneath the snow and then smeared the muck on my face, so that I had the guise of a grubby, exhausted traveler. After all, bards are meant to have come from far away, not merely the triclinium. The prospect of a ballad about Arturian had caught the interest of four or five dozen of the men and women, and they were gathered around a bonfire of branches. They had a large amphora of wine, which had been appropriated from the villa, and several drinking horns were being passed around as I arrived. I took the little harp from beneath my cloak and made a show of tuning it. This proclaimed that a ballad was about to begin. A drinking horn was handed to me, and I took a mouthful of passably good wine to settle my throat.

"Of Arturian, 'tis my song,
Vast were lands within his keeping.
And how as wayfarer he has gone,
All for his lady, he is seeking."

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When I perform I try to start as any other bard might, then slowly shape the mood of my audience to my own needs. Once I have them, I work upon their emotions, building involvement with the characters. I had reached the part where Arturian's wife had been ensorceled and abducted by the Roman governor when I saw that Elenede had joined the listeners. A cavalrymen named Calcarat noticed her as she sat down, and draped his cloak over her shoulders. By now I was a tortured picture of raw, raving despair, describing in graphic detail how Arturian's wife was ravished and defiled by first the governor, then his guests. In contrast to those inside the villa, this audience was rapturously attentive.

I sang of how Arturian rallied his despondent warriors, inspiring them with the story of Queen Boudicia's revolt. Although the warrior queen had lived many centuries earlier, my audience responded by shouting their approval, for they knew the ballads about Boudicia and her war of honor against the Romans. There were many ballads of the rebel queen, but while those told the facts of the story and celebrated the bravery of the Britons in battle, I aimed for the hearts of those who listened. For several hundred lines I described how Boudicia had been forced to watch while a legion of Roman soldiers raped and degraded her daughters. Resorting to a little poetic license, I gave her three times more daughters than were generally credited to her, but then I am a teller of stories, not a chronicler of histories. My verses concerning her initial victories against the Romans were proudly proclaimed yet deliberately brief by contrast, and I described the queen's downfall in even more detail than the violation of her daughters. In my story, she did not take poison, but was crucified as a slave by the Romans, to show that all Britons were henceforth slaves.

Now that my audience was seething with outrage, I returned forward in time to Arturian, and sang of how his men rallied about him and vowed to smash the Roman armies in Britannia. I had them winning many victories, and pursuing the Romans all the way back to Rome itself. Arturian returned to reclaim his wife, but her shame was too much for her to bear. She fled the returning, victorious Arturian and went into hiding as a dancer and harlot. I concluded that to this day Arturian wanders the Roman estates of Britannia in disguise, seeking his lost beloved, "*Ragged of clothing and wild of aspect.*" By now I had managed to shed real tears, and those of my audience who did not merely share my grief were in a state

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approaching blind fury. With the ballad over, they crowded around me, in a truly ugly mood. They offered me wine, sympathy, even their swords, and swore that Quintus would never again lay a hand upon Elenede.

It was two mornings later that I was again sheltering at the shrine of the priest, Oswald. I was awakened by a boot on my throat and the point of a sword pressing between my lips. Valcian stood over me, now wearing chainmail, and with him were two warriors. Having established our respective positions, he withdrew his blade and stepped back.

"You may sit up now," said the Byzantine noble.

Very, very slowly, I sat up, holding my hands high.

"I am fairly sure you don't want me dead," I ventured.

"Neither do we want a ballad," said Valcian firmly.

"Have I caused offense?"

"Barial, gag him and bind his hands," ordered Valcian, turning away from me.

We rode at quite a brisk pace, and before noon were back at the villa of Quintus Flavorius. At the edge of the estate's fields we reined in, and the Byzantine gestured to what was before us. Across the fields of reddish snow, smoke rose from the remains of the villa. The great wooden watchtower was no longer standing. I estimated that ten warriors, all horsemen, were encamped there.

Only now was my gag removed.

"What has happened here?" I asked. "Who are these men?"

"What has happened should be obvious," replied Valcian. "The villa has been attacked and burned."

"By these horsemen?"

"No, not so. They are elite Byzantine cavalrymen, dressed as Britons and in my service."

"Byzantines!" I exclaimed in astonishment. "Are you invading Britannia?"

"You do not understand," said Valcian. "These men are only my escort, I fled the villa and summoned them from the forest when the villa was burned."

"Then...who burned the villa?"

"Who indeed? From what I have been able to learn, it was Arturian."

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There was very little I could say to that. We rode on slowly. From a distance, the villa looked to be largely intact, but as we drew closer I could see that most of it had been burned out. A great number of rooks and ravens circled and wheeled overhead. The gate of the outer wooden stockade was open and undefended, and headless bodies littered the snow-covered ground. Dogs and birds were feeding on these, and they retreated warily as we passed. Some of the dead were naked, others were in the robes that they had been wearing at the orgy two nights earlier.

My hands were untied and I was told to dismount. One of the nearby bodies was of a man of quite substantial size. Both his head and genitals were missing, but he had the general look of Quintus. As far as I could tell from the remains of their bloodied clothing, the two merchants lay nearby. Valcian took me firmly by the arm and marched me over to two neat rows of heads on pikes flanking the path to the villa's entrance. I quickly identified Quintus, the chiefs of the three local villages, the lord's brother and sister, the lord from Mercia, the two merchants from Wessex, and several entertainers and servers.

"What do you make of this?" asked the Byzantine noble.

"I have seen worse," I managed.

"And I have done worse, but that is not the point. Until two days ago this was a small but prosperous remnant of Roman rule in Britannia. These people wore Roman togas, worshipped Roman gods, issued their guards with Roman armor and weapons, and enacted quite credible Roman orgies. Now all that has gone."

"Er, is this not a cause for celebration?" I asked. "That is, for Christians like you?"

"Indeed," he replied tersely.

A silence more icy than the snow slush beneath my boots established itself. Presently I decided that I was meant to take the initiative and ask another question.

"Who really did this?"

"As I said, Arturian."

"Ah. Er, so *you*...are Arturian?"

"No!" he said firmly, his keen, brown eyes searching my face for guile and guilt.

"Er, then Arturian came here and did this?"

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"Possibly. Bard, I was not really sent here to make alliances with pathetic pagan degenerates like Quintus Flavorius. Emperor Justinian himself charged me with meeting Arturian and securing his loyalty. Two nights ago, I very nearly did. Come."

We walked between the rows of heads and into the villa's courtyard, then proceeded up the central path. To the right, the bath house was just charred timbers and blackened walls, but the rooms of the slaves' and servants' quarters were undamaged. Ahead of us, the tablinum and triclinium were burned out and without roofs. At the center of the courtyard a bonfire blazed, and gathered around it were four Byzantine cavalrymen, the cavalryman from the estate's guard named Calcarat, and a woman that I recognized as Elenede.

"Good people, this is a bard," Valcian announced as we arrived before them. "Do any of you recognize him?"

Both Calcarat and Elenede were dressed as Briton villagers now, and their bearing was different. They both stood proudly before us, their shoulders back and their heads high.

"Lord Valcian, he's the bard who sang here the night of the burning," responded Elenede.

"Aye, great lord, and he sang right well of Arturian on that night," added Calcarat.

"Very good," said Valcian. "Please excuse us now, I am giving the bard a tour of the villa."

We proceeded up the path to the tablinum's entrance. It was burned out, of course, and the ashes of the collapsed roof's timbers still smoldered. Here and there I could see traces of furniture and the feast amid the burned-out remains of the roof. The kitchen and storage rooms were undamaged, but had been stripped bare. In one of the bedchambers, where the roof had survived, a naked couple lay skewered together by a single spear. They had apparently been caught in the act of lovemaking. Their heads had been removed. In the next bedchamber a pair of naked legs protruded from beneath the shattered tiles and charred beams.

"It is oddly chilling to think that I lay between those legs on that same bed just two nights ago," said Valcian, with a tone in his voice that was somehow contemptuous and wistful at the same time.

"So you were here for the attack, my lord?"

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"I was, just as you were. When this poor soul began to doze, I got up, dressed, and roamed the villa. While Quintus and his guests remained at play in the tablinum, I saw and heard you sing to the field hands and guardsmen out in the snow, beyond the gate. It was a ballad of Arturian."

"Arturian is all the fashion, as ballads go."

"So it seems. After this I walked out across the fields to where one of my escort was waiting amid the trees. He reported that no group bigger than my dozen disguised Byzantines was within five miles. Suddenly there was a commotion from the villa, and we saw flames and heard screams. Having only one of my men with me, I was not inclined to go back and investigate. Tell me, bard, what did you see?"

"Very little, my lord. I was finishing my performance when the fighting began. I did not even see the attackers arrive. As soon as the screams and fighting began, I fled."

"So you did not stay to help defend the villa?"

"It was not my villa, great lord."

"The estate's guards also fled without a fight. There were none among the dead, you see. That is odd, because those guards were passably well armed and trained. What do you think, bard? Why did the guards flee?"

"I cannot say. Their mood was good while I sang to them. Quintus paid them well, and they lived more comfortably than they would in a village. They gave me hospitality and coin — which was more than Quintus did."

"Indeed, Quintus was not pleased with your performance at his revel," Valcian agreed.

"Some people just don't appreciate art."

"Elenede, you also left the revel," said Valcian, turning away from me. "What did you see?"

"Much the same as the bard," she replied. "The attack seemed to come out of nowhere. Some of us fled, others joined in."

"Calcarat, you have admitted to turning upon your Roman master. Why?"

"I...the ballads that the bard sang were very moving. When the attack began, it was as if the ballad had come to life. I blazed with hatred for the Romans."

"What did you see of the attackers?"

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"Little, very little. They were dressed as we were."

"So as to steal into the estate?"

"I suppose. Some even sat listening to the bard's singing, I am sure of that."

Valcian paced before us for a time, his head down and his hands clasped behind his back.

"By the time I had ventured across the woodlands, gathered my men and returned, the villa was ablaze, and the Romans and their guests were as they are now," he explained, turning his attention back to me. "We found Calcarat and Elenede in the kitchen, hard at work making baby Britons. All the others were gone; guards, field hands, and attackers."

A wall suddenly collapsed, startling the carrion birds into the air. Soot and ash was mixed with the red snow and blood in the villa's courtyard, and had been churned into a foul, ugly mush by countless footfalls over the two days past. At that moment it began snowing again, and the flakes were still reddish pink. I had to remind myself that it was July, and high summer. Valcian turned back to Calcarat.

"Relate your story yet again, guardsman, with all the detail that you can recall," he ordered.

"The bard sang the epic of Arturian. It was long in the telling, but once he had finished we all cried for him to sing it again. Most of the other guards left their posts to listen. Ah...it was very moving. The bard lamented with real tears, he shrieked with passion, he even fell to his knees at the part where Arturian is told that his queen has left him. We all roared for vengeance and blood, the guards brandished their swords. We cheered the victories of Arturian — then all at once Arturian and his men were with us, and we really were fighting the Romans."

"Just like that?" asked Valcian.

"I have no clear memories of how the fighting began. We were just in a mood that rendered us dangerous."

"Try harder," said Valcian, resting a hand on the pommel of his sword.

"Er, well, the bard was repeating parts of the ballad. It was the passage where the Roman sorcerer defiled and degraded Arturian's queen. Her name was Elenede, just as this lady is Elenede. There and then, we fancied that the queen *was* this lady. We raised her shoulder-high, shouting that the queen was free, we paraded her around the fire, cheering."

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"They interrupted my singing — " I began.

"Shut up!" snapped Valcian. "Calcarat, go on."

"It was now that Quintus came out. He was in a rage, whip in hand, and demanding to know why the fires in the hypocaust had been allowed to die out. He began to lay about him with the whip. Someone, perhaps Arturian, slew him, then led us into the villa to kill all the others. We slew them, struck off their heads, then set the rooms of luxury ablaze after taking back the provisions, wine, and wealth that the Roman had hoarded by our toilings."

"So, Arturian and his men fled with the loot?" asked Valcian.

"Indeed not, my lord. They are men of surpassing virtue, valuing justice above mere plunder. They withdrew with nothing, leaving we guards, slaves, and field hands to carry away what we would in recompense for our years of toil."

"And to drink yourselves legless," said Valcian. "Bard, what is your recollection?"

"It is precisely as they said."

"Tell me more," he insisted, drawing his sword and letting the point rest in the slushy snow between us.

"Ah, I did not notice that Arturian and his men had joined our company. They must have been dressed as field hands to blend in all the better. When the fighting started, I fled for the woods."

"Amazing. You sing so lustily of battles, yet flee as soon as one starts?"

"I am a bard. I avoid battles, except when forced to fight. I carry nothing but ballads, and I sing to all. Folk may not have what I carry if I am dead, thus outlaws and warlords suffer me to live."

This did not satisfy Valcian, who now swung his sword idly as he began to pace again.

"I have been in this land for many months now, seeking Arturian. Word of his exploits has reached Constantinople; word of how he rallies Britons against Saxons, slays monsters, defends Christians against pagans, and above all, kills Romans. I have seen many burned-out villas, and all have perished within this, this twilight year past. In each and every case the local villagers said that Arturian had done the deed. Word has it that he has a small band of invincible horsemen, and that they can beat odds

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of hundreds to one. I have been charged by Emperor Justinian with forming an alliance with Arturian, so that the Roman Empire's former realms may be gathered into the rule of the Byzantine Empire."

"Arturian fights to free this island from the dregs of Roman rule," I replied, striving to be defiant yet deferential at once. "Do you really think he would let Britannia be enslaved under a new Roman Empire?"

"My conclusion precisely," declared Valcian. "That is why I am taking you prisoner and returning to Constantinople with you."

He waited for my reply, but who could reply to such words as those? After a lengthy pause he continued.

"Bard, you are Arturian."

Elenede and Calcarat gaped, while I too tried hard to look astonished.

"I would have thought that you were a better judge of warriors than that, my Lord Valcian." I laughed uneasily.

"There are warriors, and there are leaders, bard. You are a leader. Amid the ruins of countless Roman estates I have been told by the survivors of how Arturian appeared in the guise of a bard, surveyed the defenses while singing to the guards and slaves, then returned with his invincible horsemen and annihilated the place. I was lucky this time. Lucky that I arrived as you did."

"Er, so I am all that you will take back to your emperor? He will surely be disappointed. I am but a grubby bard."

"No, I will take with me Arturian, and word that any number of Saxon warlords live in fear of Arturian, and would gladly ally themselves with the Byzantine Empire if he is to be imprisoned there. Calcarat, Elenede, go."

BECAUSE IT WAS snowing, Valcian did not lead us out of the ruined estate immediately. My arms were bound and my feet hobbled, then I was taken to the slaves' quarters, which like the villa's kitchen, were undamaged. Here we stayed for the rest of that day and the following night. As dawn rose the snow continued, blanketing the villa, fields, and woodlands more deeply in red. Valcian untied my hobbles and marched me over to the horses.

"The snow is deep, Lord Valcian," said one of his men as they hoisted me into the saddle.

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"If we wait any longer the snow will be too deep for the horses; we must leave now," insisted Valcian.

"What sort of place is this? Snow in summer!"

"If there is snow in summer, imagine what the winter will be like. Hurry, we are racing both the snow and Arturian's men."

"Do you expect an attack, my lord?"

"Not just now. This man travels from target to target as a lone bard, while his horsemen go by other routes. Most likely they are already near some Saxon stronghold, waiting for him to arrive and lead them. We must be long gone when they come in search of him."

"You are greatly mistaken — " I began.

"Not another word, or you will be gagged!" warned Valcian.

Apart from the heads on the poles, the carnage of three days earlier had been hidden under the newly fallen snow. Valcian reined in as we drew level with the head of Quintus.

"Farewell, Quintus Flavorius," he said with mocking formality. "Take what satisfaction you will from the downfall of your conqueror, Arturian. Take comfort too from the knowledge that you were the last Roman ruler in all of Britannia. I have looked everywhere. There are no others."

I had no interest in being gagged, so I said nothing. We rode out across the fields toward the woodlands. The trees were laden with red snow, and because they still had the leaves of summer, the loads of snow had snapped many branches. It was from the shelter of fallen boughs and detritus that the attack came as we reached the outskirts of the woods.

Valcian and his men were on the alert — that cannot be denied — yet what they had been expecting was Arturian's cavalry, and in numbers little different to theirs. What erupted from the snow-shrouded woods were hundreds of villagers with spears and pikes, runaway slaves with clubs, former estate guards with swords, hunters with bows, and even women and children throwing stones.

Although my hands were bound and my horse was tethered to the saddle of Valcian's mount, I had not been tied into my own saddle. Valcian glanced back to ensure that I was still behind him, then shouted to his men to charge out of the ambush. It was the work of a moment to roll from my saddle and into the snow once Valcian looked away, and I lay there as still

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as death while the other Byzantine warriors rode past me, the hoofs of their mounts kicking ruddy snow about and covering me.

I only raised my head once the riders were well clear of me, and I did not try to run. As warriors the Byzantines were more deadly than any save those in my own ballads. Those with bows quickly had them strung, and without mercy they shot down the villagers who surrounded them. Other Byzantines charged the ranks of the Britons with spear and sword, their warhorses lashing out with their hoofs and trampling the vanguard of the ragged little army. From a distance the woodland hunters circled with their bows, however, picking off riders or horses as the opportunities offered themselves. By sheer press of bodies the escape of the Byzantines was blocked, and as the fighting continued I used my teeth to work at the cords that bound my hands.

I had freed myself just as Valcian was overwhelmed by the villagers, who swarmed up over his horse and pulled him down. Picking up a Byzantine sword seemed like a particularly unwise idea, so I took a spear from the hand of a dead villager as I shambled forward, hoping to blend in with the crowd. I was quickly recognized, however. Both Calcarat and Elenede hailed me as Arturian, and after that there was no escaping my liberators.

In all, five Britons had died for every Byzantine warrior killed, but there had been hundreds against a dozen. Those hundreds had fought with the mindless, fanatical bravery of people who follow a legend. Standing on a rock and gesturing back to the estate of Quintus Flavorius, I did the only thing possible in the circumstances. I became Arturian, for the first and only time.

"People of Britannia, three nights ago you joined with my men to wipe out the Roman ruler Quintus Flavorius," I shouted. "You ended five hundred years of Roman rule. This day you have annihilated the vanguard of a new empire, whose emperor casts greedy eyes upon our fair lands."

There was much cheering at these words, and I allowed it to continue while I thought about what else to say.

"The red snow, the midwinter gloom in summer, even the threat of famine, they are all signs," I concluded. "Signs to take the stores and riches from Roman farmers to survive. You are being forced to destroy the last traces of Roman rule by this twilight summer in the twilight year of

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the Roman Empire. Never again will Britannia be conquered by any empire. Britannia will have its own empire. Britannia will conquer Rome itself!"

This time the cheering continued for much longer, but it did not surprise me. My talent is for raising passions in those who hear me speak, whether the hermit priest, Valcian, Quintus, the guards and slaves of his estate, or even the subjects of Arturian. The Britons would now follow me anywhere. What to do, I wondered. My talent was to start riots, not rule wisely.

When I finally stepped down from the rock, I thanked Calcarat and Elenede for rallying those who had rescued me. My little harp was returned, and nearly every man present seemed to want to arm me with his own sword. Gold looted from the Byzantines and the villa was offered to me, and every girl and woman that I met made it clear that they wanted a chance to allow me little sleep in the nights to come. I traded wise but meaningless words with leaders and warriors, judged minor disputes over the division of loot, conferred fabricated titles upon the bravest of those who had fought, and had more food offered to me than would be needed for a Roman orgy.

All the while I was troubled. Perhaps it showed in my eyes, for many of those attending me noticed it and were clearly concerned. I had become Arturian. I had riches, followers, warriors, and a reputation that could spread my domains across an area that would become a large kingdom. I had nothing to fear from the real Arturian turning up, for *I* had created him for one of my ballads. Well did I remember the night that I first performed it, and how the listeners rioted and burned a villa that had survived the fall of the Roman Empire by many decades. Just as clearly I remembered my subsequent decision to journey from villa to villa, inspiring rebellion in the name of Arturian, and single-handedly cutting down the last of Rome's legacy in Britannia.

I had shaped a hero with incomparable command and wisdom, and now I was being hailed as that very hero. It would have been so easy to let myself be swept along. I could have been King Arturian, ruling lands and peoples, commanding armies, and living in such splendour as was possible in Britannia in that twilight year of the Roman Empire.

I could not do it.

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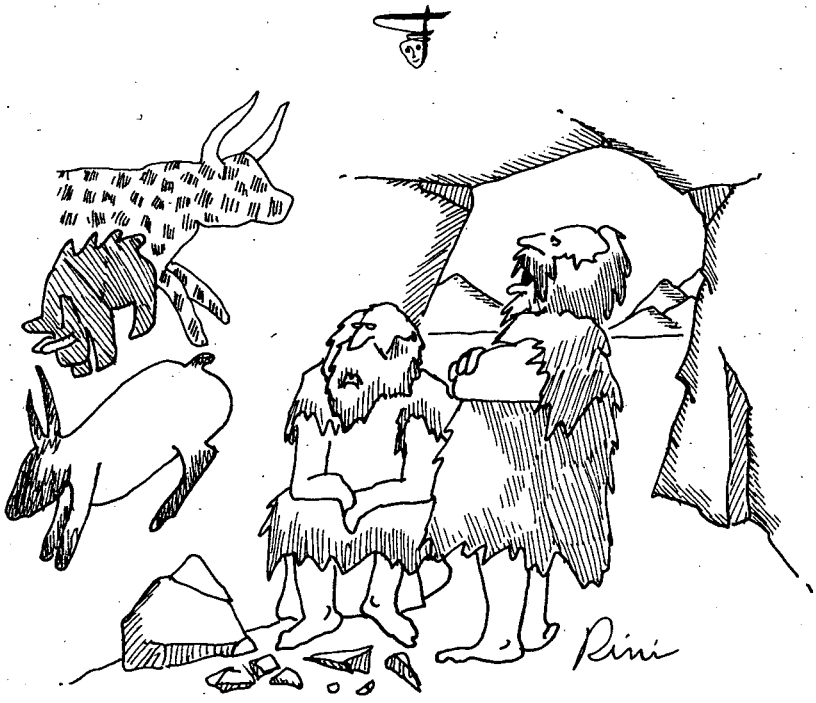
As Arturian, I would be a disappointment. Arturian was greater than the rulers of kingdoms like Wessex, Mercia, or Deria, and he was certainly far greater than a mere bard like me. I could have prospered as Arturian, but *he* would have been diminished by me. What father could wish that upon his child? Were Arturian to remain a legend within ballads, however, he would always be what I had made him.

That night I declared a great feast to honor our victory, then slipped away into the woods while my followers distracted themselves with drink, song, fighting, and all associated revelries. Falling snow covered my tracks, and thus it was that I vanished out of time, legend and chronicle, leaving Arturian in my place.



"I don't know much about magical realism, but this smacks of art for art's sake."

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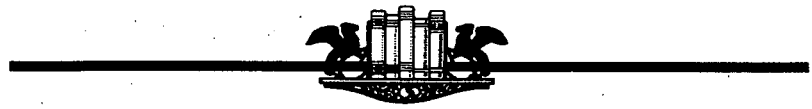

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, by J. K. Rowling, Scholastic/Arthur A. Levine Books, 2007, $34.99.

SO HERE WE are at the end. A few thousand pages after Harry Potter stepped onto the stage in the first book of this seven book series, we've finally come to the story's conclusion.

At this point in the proceedings, everyone has pretty much made up their mind as to how they feel about the books, so there's no point in my trying to convince anyone about their worth, one way or another. But having looked at a number of the installments from time to time in this column, I thought I'd check in one last time, now that we have the whole story.

First, I have to admit that *The Order of the Phoenix* (book five) pretty much exhausted me — so much so that I didn't get to the sixth book until the week before *The Deathly Hallows* was released. It wasn't the length of *Phoenix* that bothered me — I was quite happy through the first 600 pages or so, not at all overwhelmed by the wealth of detail as the familiar cast went about their business in another school year at Hogwarts.

No, it was the last section of the book, when the action took over, that felt tiresome. I'm not sure why. Perhaps there were simply too many characters running about, fighting the good fight. I got a little bit of that feeling at the end of *The Deathly Hallows* with the climactic battle in Hogwarts, too. But in both cases, the feeling went away after the Big Action scenes.

Now, I'm not going to say Rowling is one of the best writers we have working today. While her prose always gets the job done, it's sometimes clunky, and it rarely sings. She tends to have her characters tell information, rather than showing the reader. And really.

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Those kids — while they're seventeen by the last book — have always seemed like precocious fourteen-year-olds. Kids grow up fast. By their late teens they may not have the emotional maturity that they'll grow into later in life, but they're miles away from how they were when they were thirteen and fourteen.

Except in the Harry Potter books.

But with all that said, Rowling is a born storyteller, and that's why her books have been embraced as widely and as passionately as they have been. Sure, we're always looking for someone who delivers the whole package, but for most of us, storytelling trumps everything else. And while you might be able to pick out her influences, like a master chef working with tried and true ingredients, the end result of Rowling's books is something new and different, and effortlessly readable.

So I admire Rowling. She began this series without artifice — a poor, single mother who had a story she wanted to tell. The initial success had nothing to do with the publicity hoopla that accompanied the later books. It was born of reader enthusiasm and word-of-mouth. In other words, she did this on her own and she deserves all the success the series has brought her.

And lastly, in a culture that is fractured as much as ours is with information overload — as well as how that information comes to us — the publication of these last few Potter books has been, perhaps, one of the last instances we'll see of a massive audience, all enjoying the same entertainment phenomenon at the same time. The complex splintered structure of how entertainment is delivered to us these days makes that element of the release of this last book certainly something to celebrate.

Coyote Dreams, by C. E. Murphy, Luna, 2007, $14.95.

Now, I highly doubt that C.E. Murphy was taking the advice I had for her in my review of her last book, but in her third outing with Joanne Walker, the character finally accepts the magic that's been going on all around her for the past two books and gets down to dealing with her problems. There's still some complaining, but now it's mostly along the lines of Walker wishing she was more prepared — understandable, given her latest predicament.

In *Coyote Dreams*, the citizens

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of the city of Seattle are falling asleep and not waking up. Not all the citizens, but primarily people who have had some contact with Walker, and since she's a cop, it's mostly the police who are falling asleep. Needless to say, that does not bode well for the safety of the citizens of Seattle.

Walker figures the cause has to be magical, but now that she's willing to accept her magical abilities, she finds herself needing a crash course on how to use them properly. Unfortunately, her spirit guide is missing, she keeps having weird dreams, people continue to fall asleep all around her, and everything seems to be spiraling out of control.

This series has always been fast-paced and entertaining — and continues to be so — and Walker makes a good viewpoint character, especially now that she's not spending every few pages questioning her sanity. I also like how Murphy feeds us more of Walker's backstory with each book, which adds a certain poignancy to her present situation.

I'm guessing there'll be more volumes in this series, and I know I'll be reading them.

The Good Guy, by Dean Koontz, Bantam, 2007, $27.

I'm really not sure how Koontz does it. He takes such simple concepts and unwinds them into hair-raising stories that simply won't let you go until you get to the end of the book. And then the characters stay in your mind for weeks afterward.

The title character of this novel, the "good guy," is Tim Carrier, a man who just wants to be left alone. He's a mason with no real ambition because he likes the idea of looking ahead and seeing himself making walls, having a drink in the local bar after work, and then going home to a life with no surprises. There's the hint that it was different for him once, but before Koontz gets into that, he has Carrier mistaken for a hit man and given an envelope of money with the photo of an attractive woman and her address in it.

Carrier doesn't have the chance to protest, because by the time he realizes the stranger's on the level — the man really *does* want someone dead — he's gone. And then it gets worse, because another man sits beside Carrier, obviously the hit man. Carrier puts him off. Pretending to be the hit man's client, Carrier says he's changed his mind. When this second man leaves, Carrier realizes he has to warn the

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woman that someone wants her dead.

The hows and whys of what brought her to have a price on her head are beautifully constructed. But at this point in the story, neither Carrier nor the woman know anything except that the hit man hasn't been put off, he might be a policeman, and he certainly has incredible resources to draw upon. No matter how fast or far they flee, he always finds them. Sometimes he's even waiting for them at their next supposed safe haven.

A good thriller runs by a ticking clock, and they don't count off the seconds much more successfully than in a Koontz book. But it's the characters I love: The good ones, with their banter and their secrets. The antagonists who'd give Thomas Harris's serial killers a run for their money, except the difference here is, Koontz writes with great heart. He takes us into a killer's head so that we can understand them, not to revel in their despicable amorality.

I've said it before, but it bears repeating: it's a wonderful thing when a writer with such a large body of work continues to write better books each time out.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

Emshwiller: Infinity x Two: The Life and Art of Ed and Carol Emshwiller, by Luis Ortiz, Foreword and Artwork Captions by Alex Eisenstein, Nonstop Press, 2007, $39.95.

WHEN come upon by current friends and fellow writers, the photograph on the jacket of my first book occasions great hilarity. It was the sixties, after all. And the photo was taken on the porch of the Anchorage, Damon Knight's and Kate Wilhelm's home, at the beginning of the last day of the week-long Milford Conference. I was very young, next door to starving, and very, very hungover.

Many young people at the time believed they were going about the work of changing society. A few of us, with somewhat more focus and a tad less ambition, but with equal assiduity, were going about the work of changing science fiction.

I bring this up here because the book at hand deals with a very specific time in our cultural history and with segments of our culture that until recently have been poorly documented, and because my recollection speaks to those obscure drives that can impel us, first, to create art at whatever personal cost and, second, to choose to work in marginal forms. I was a very serious young science fiction writer, and I wrote short stories. Believe me, I was well out of the thick of things.

But I also bring up the photo for another reason. Look closely at the credit on that first book of mine: *Photo by Ed Emshwiller.*

There was a time, boys and girls, back just after the war — no, not this war, and not *that* one either, the one back around the forties? — when being an artist or writer was the coolest thing possible. Wild, huh?

Not coincidentally, that was also the time that science fiction was truly coming into its own. Think man-made lake. Think lots

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of boaters. Speed, whoops of joy, a bit of apparent danger, a bit of romance.

Among the many other things *Emshwiller Infinity x Two* does (and we'll get to those in a moment), it gives fresh documentation to that era, the early boom years of science fiction, using as fulcrum the career of one of the field's finest artists.

A new popular art, be it jazz, action painting, hip-hop, or science fiction, passes through a number of stages. First there is rebellion, as the evolving form, clearly derivative, begins to conceive of itself as something new on the Earth. There is synthesis, the manifesto stage, during which it tries to define itself, generally in terms of exclusion. There is the stage at which the forms become set and begin to harden, to calcify. There is challenge, as those set forms are broken, fresh influences imported; then a time of factions. And finally there is mainstreaming, as the "new" form flows into the general culture.

The first great generation of science fiction, readers and writers alike, is almost gone, yet still, for some, existed within our lifetimes. Many of us have had the chance to meet Robert Heinlein, Theodore Sturgeon, Phil Farmer, Fred Pohl, Damon Knight, Fritz Leiber. And many of us as readers vividly recall the raw power, the visceral impact, of the early days of *Galaxy*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Astounding*, and original paperback novels.

Looking through the reproductions here, I am amazed at how closely Ed's work circled the days of my late youth and early adulthood — just as it did the early adulthood of the genre. The cover painting "Get a Horse," with its depiction of a crashed spaceship being towed by a mammoth stallion? I read that issue of *If* at band camp, summer after the ninth grade. *F&SF* with his cover for "The Silver Eggheads" or "Have Space Suit Will Travel" or "A Day at the Beach"? Other summers, other seasons, sitting under trees or in lawn chairs or on porches in various cities. Emsh's work was for many of us, as Alex Eisenstein writes in his introduction, "a kind of terrific SF wallpaper, a continuous surround of space adventure and the far future." As was the science fiction that Ed illustrated. And yes — as Ortiz and Eisenstein note — we took both for granted.

Emshwiller recalls those times, the wallpaper, the surround, that moment in our youth and cultural collective when everything ahead

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was bright and shining. In that respect, certainly, it serves nostalgia. It also evokes wonderfully the sf world of the fifties and sixties: Horace Gold sequestered in his apartment on East 14th Street, the succession of cheap magazine offices in midtown, Friday gatherings in which writers would pick the artwork around which they'd write their story. Ed Emshwiller was witness to much of that, and, with this book, we become the same.

Ortiz catches up marvelously the insularity of sf, its missionary zeal, its fulsome power — *and* the shabbiness and tawdriness that's always been a part. For as much as we love the mind-stretching nature of the genre, many of us embrace as readily its rude appeal: its garishness, its outlaw nature and adolescent rebelliousness. R. A. Lafferty is quoted here as saying "The covers were the best part of those old magazines, by a long ways." And Isaac Asimov: "The images are what attracted me in science fiction, more even than the surprises and the ideas and the crazy plots."

By 1952 Ed's images had become so prevalent that, of 29 sf magazine titles and a total of 153 issues published that year, Emsh art was in or on a third of them. A fine sampling of this work is offered herein, in beautifully done reproductions with intelligent, witty commentary by Alex Eisenstein. But the book's aim is far higher.

One may have good reason to approach such a book with misgivings, fearful of fannish hyperbole, pauperish content, lack of horizon and perspective. This, however, is a serious inquiry into one artist's life, a book whose excellent production values mirror its overall ambition. Nor does Ortiz ever lose perspective, constantly drawing back, be it from the sf subculture or from the artist's narrowly focused world, to the larger. Of the debate over the genre's origins he notes that "the reality is — outside of science fiction fandom — no one cares." Writing of the Eleventh World Science Fiction Convention in 1953, he lists the six sf or fantasy movies playing within easy distance from the convention hotel.

Emshwiller then is, first, the biography of an artist who moved from success as a commercial illustrator into the rarefied air of avant-garde film. As such, it is also an inquiry into the nature of creativity — what causes it, what drives it, how it manifests — and a portrait of the nonconforming artist doggedly pursuing sparrows that perhaps he alone can see, relentlessly and even

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obsessively stealing time and energy from other parts of his life, subsidizing the work however he can.

This aspect gains density in that the book is also a portrait of Ed's marriage to Carol, and of her development from novice to writer's writer to general acclaim. The couple met at art school and were married in 1949; Ed's career as illustrator began taking form on the boat trip back from their honeymoon year abroad as Ed passed the voyage reading American magazines bought at a Paris newsstand: "Between waves (I'd never make a good sailor), I let the obvious idea grow. As soon as I hit shore I started knocking out samples."

That career ran just over fourteen years, leading to 700-plus covers and untold interior illustrations for such as *F&SF*, *Infinity*, *Super-Science Fiction*, *Mercury Mystery Book-Magazine*, Ace Books, *Fantastic Universe*, *Untamed*, Gnome Press, and *Lion Adventure Magazine*. Painting so often to tight deadlines, Ed worked mostly in gouache, or opaque watercolors, because other mediums were too slow drying. Again for expedience, his interior illustrations were often done on scratchboard, a board covered with chalky substance that is inked then scratched with a sharp object to bring out white lines.

As one might imagine from the range of venues, there was considerable variety, from stylized neo-realist painting to surreal juxtapositions of color and form, but there were also many strains in common — his importing of modernist design, for instance, which is perhaps best seen in line drawings for pulps like *Planet Stories* and *Startling Stories*. His draftsmanship and figures are instantly recognizable. But given all else, it is Ed's wit that stands out. An Emsh cover hits you in the face. Then you begin to take notice of the details, the small jokes and twists and visual puns occurring off center, almost out of sight....

By the mid-sixties Ed had mostly given up illustration for art cinema and, eventually, a professorship at CalArts. Several of his films, such as *Relativity*, *Image, Flesh, and Voice*, and *Sunstone*, are landmarks in the development of experimental film. He died in 1990, age sixty-five, of chronic lymphocytic leukemia, a cancer of the blood and bones. In an introduction included here, Carol writes of those final days.

She had been undergoing a development similar to Ed's in her

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own work. Trying her hand after years of hanging around with sf people who "talked about writing as if it was a chess game and a normal person could learn to do it," she began writing with genre markets in mind. "Something clicked. So this is what writing is all about. It's not at all that stuff in high school or freshman English." Following the tenor of the times, her stories ("Pelt," "The Piece Thing," "A Day at the Beach") tended toward dissent and coded protest.

Ed had remarked that from his earliest films he was interested "in making almost pure visual abstractions with practically no allegorical implications." He strove, he said, toward "the sense of the unfolding of a small universe." Likewise, Carol had begun looking beyond conventional fiction, slowly letting go of her hold on plot and embracing the avant-garde as a means of saying "something different than has ever been said before." Reading John Cage and Frank O'Hara, she had come to the realization that there were volumes and positive and negative spaces in language just as there were in paintings or sculpture or film, and that these could be manipulated, nudged into new, nonlinear, non-narrative relationships that might at once reflect and reconfigure the world.

Quite aside from the main text, those of us who care deeply for science fiction will find much here to give pause and thought. Brian Aldiss's remark that, once impoverished by its isolation, science fiction now stands in danger of being impoverished by its popularity. Ortiz's observations concerning those writers who "looking for a new way of skinning the literary cat, found a new plaything in the blue-collar world of genre science fiction." Or his description of the avant-garde world, which winds up sounding an awful lot like the sf world:

"A groundswell of lessons learned from one another drove the avant-garde community along with a mixture of iconoclasm, homage, naivete, eclecticism, a demand for seriousness, and a certain amount of flippancy and prankishness."

Ed spoke of *dynamic contrasts* as the wellspring of his art, his and Carol's lives being replete with same. They lived in Levittown, the very icon of the American suburb; yet daughter Susan had no notion how to respond when introduced to "normal people" in friend's homes. "It sometimes felt a little like we Emshwillers were the Munsters or the Addams Family of our neighborhood," son Peter says. "...No

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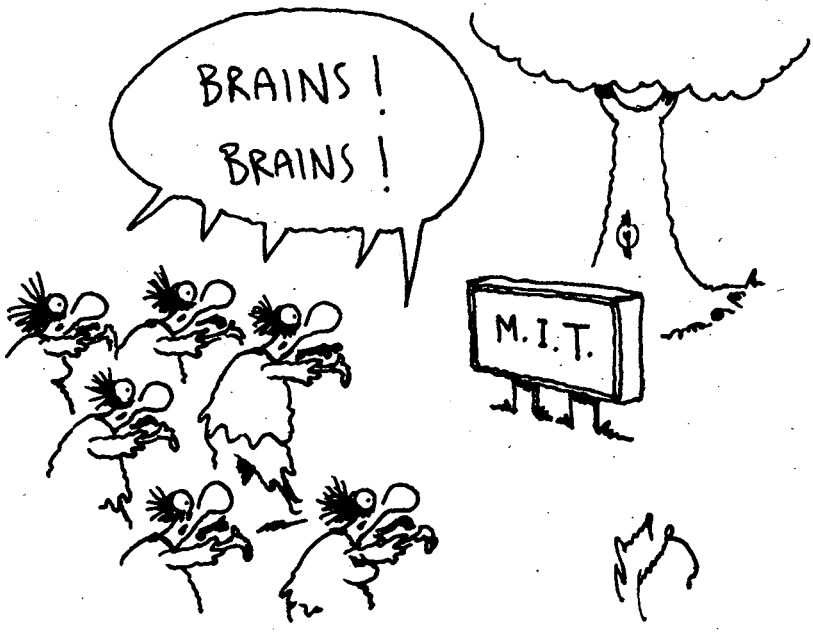
one else's parents cared deeply about art and politics but couldn't have cared less about making money or acquiring things." Besides their children, Carol admits, she and Ed spoke only about art and movies, and they did that *all* the time — carrying forward the fire and enthusiasm most of us lose after college and our early careers. Attendees recall them "mooning over each other" at a 1985 Nashville convention, together almost forty years at that point but then spending long periods apart, Ed teaching in California, Carol in New York.

Interviewers frequently ask why, after forty-some years of writing, I remain drawn to teaching it. The answer, I tell them, is contained in the question. All too easily and soon one becomes professionalized, focusing on the mechanics, the production, the practicalities. Teaching makes me remember why this is so important to me, why I have worked so hard and long at it, why I started doing it in the first place.

So does this book. ☙



The more discriminating zombies break off from the pack.

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Michaela Roessner is the author of several novels, including Walkabout Woman *and* Vanishing Point. *Our readers might recall her story "Horse-Year Women" from our Jan. 2006 issue. She says that her new story ties together several threads: an Aikido student who is currently enlisted in the Coast Guard partly so he can attend film school when his tour of duty is over; her Vietnam vet husband; hearing her friend Marta Randall mourn the loss of certain old buildings in Berkeley; and her own interest in the conventions of wish fulfillment stories.*

And then there's the fact that 'tis the holiday season....

It's a Wonderful Life

By Michaela Roessner

DODGING ALL THE FOLKS wearing white lab coats who were rushing about, Cal stuck close to the far side of the hallway, using his mop handle to nudge his wheeled bucket along the corridor of the subbasement third floor. He tried to make himself as thin as possible against the wall, tried to look like less of a janitor/slacker by pulling the zipper of his work jumpsuit higher over the black T-shirt underneath; the one that said "Cannes Fan" in the faded silver lettering of too many trips through the washing machine.

The younger technicians had been drafted into hauling down new, revamped equipment. They were having trouble pulling it all out of the service elevator, pushing it the length of the hall, then jostling it through the designated room's double-wide swinging doors.

The older ones shuffled papers on clipboards, checking off crisp little check marks on long lists, frowning, not looking up even once or breaking stride, not questioning for a moment that the surrounding chaos would part before them like the Red Sea did for Charleton Heston — they were that confident of their status.

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Cal glanced into the room as he passed. *Busy bees. Busy bees.* The engineers, physicists, administrators, technicians, security spooks, and who knows else swarmed over banks of machines, tiers of switches, and a vipers' nest worth of electrical cables. The tangle of cables reminded Cal of Indiana Jones's snake pit.

It was always like this. The secret separate parts that had been abuilding in the different departments all coming and fitting together into a big-ass, room-filling, three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle.

Cal shoved his galvanized metal mop bucket forward. All it meant to *him* was that in the end there'd be, yet again, one less room for him to clean down here. He glanced over his shoulder, back the way he'd come from slopping down the Control Center at the end of the hallway by the regular elevators and the stairway. Along the hall, between the Control Center and where he stood, he could see the double-wide doors of four other rooms, two on each side of the hallway, facing each other. Their glass windows were blacked out; their doors sealed shut.

Cal wondered, in an idle sort of way, how far the Brass would cut his hours if they ran out of rooms on this floor for the big experiment. They still had five that hadn't been used. One directly across from the room being prepped, and four more on down the line, all the way to the freight elevator.

At the rate of roughly one room every year, he still might not be retired by the time they had to seal off the whole danged floor. At worst he'd be docked to two-thirds pay, since he cleaned the other two floors of the subbasement. Knowing these folks, though, most likely they'd just dig themselves a fourth subbasement floor and keep on trucking. He could probably keep working at full-time pay until he keeled over.

"Watch out, please! Coming through! Sorry!" A female engineer-type shouted in warning. Cal shoved off to the opposite wall, dodging a machinery-laden juggernaut bearing down on him. He recognized it as recording equipment.

Even with long, flatbed dollies, the young researchers left deep-grooved marks on the floor's gray linoleum. Deeper and blacker smudges than the last time. Cal raised his eyebrows, scraped his lower teeth over the brush edge where his gray mustache turned down onto his upper lip. He might soon have one less room to clean, but he'd be putting in extra

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time scrubbing up that tread. Merry Christmas to you, too, he thought at the retreating white-coated backs.

One of the clipboards — a tall, distinguished-looking African American man — snapped his fingers at Cal. "Calvin! Calvin Hallet! You have to leave this floor now."

Cal tipped his head down the hall. "I still haven't cleaned the two rooms left on this side, Dr. Williams." Dr. Williams looked like Morgan Freeman but sounded like Samuel Jackson.

"That's all right. We're deadlining today so you're off-routine. This floor will be secured and locked down in fifteen minutes. All nonessential personnel have to go."

Cal nodded. He knew the drill better than some of the younger researchers. He'd been on board since the very first time. Since the very first sealed-off room. Of course nobody ever sent the janitor a memo. But he'd recognized the signs that today was the day the deal would go down.

"I'll put away my gear and head on up," he said. Cal reversed his direction. The janitor closet and the restrooms on this floor were around the corner from the Control Center, in a short stub of a corridor. He looked through the experiment room's windows again on the way. Things inside were shaping up like clockwork.

Banks of silvery stainless steel consoles lined the walls, blinking with a blitzkrieg of red and green lights like an overdone Christmas display. Cal suppressed a smile. He knew that most of it was just bells and whistles for registering and logging data.

The contraptions with the real mojo were the two simple-looking big chronometers, same as always, and the oversized switch like a circuit breaker handle. And the ten-by-ten-by-ten-foot glass-walled cube that formed a transparent room-within-a-room in the middle of the floor. Inside this clear cage was the "carriage," as they called it. It balanced on an intricate sled-like arrangement of metal tubing bolted to the floor.

This time the carriage was a canoe-sized flat-bottomed boat. A technician stood inside the glass booth, leaning over and twiddling with some machinery tucked under the boat's floorboards.

Last year's carriage had been a vintage 1940's Volkswagen — a true German folks' wagon, complete with khaki paint job and Nazi swastikas

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on the side panels. It could have come straight off the set of *The Great Escape* or *Stalag 17*.

Before he swung his gear around the corner to his closet, Cal glanced at the clock over the elevator: 11 A.M. He got off work at 2:30 in the afternoon. The lab coats were so busy down here, so excited, he knew they'd skip lunch altogether today. Probably dinner too. He might as well go up and mop the cafeteria now instead of at 1:30 P.M. after the lunch hour —normally his last chore of the day before clocking out. He'd take his own lunch break while he was at it.

THE CAFETERIA, up on the first subbasement floor, usually bustled with food preparations this late in the morning.

Not today. Marilyn, who ran the place, had one of the two young army privates who worked under her doing a major clean-up on the ovens. She had the other one immersed in the nasty job of dredging out a kitchen sump. They were both on loan from the base in Oakland.

Cal wondered if Admin had also failed to send Marilyn a memo. If not, she'd still picked up on today's vibe. All she'd set out for lunch was a minimum of sandwich makings and three chafing dishes staying warm over sterno on a table near the register. The long bank of stainless steel food tubs lined up under the cafeteria's sneeze guard lay gleaming and empty.

Marilyn was holding down her industrial strength electric mixer into a big bowl, whipping up something chocolatey. She nodded at Cal and his broom, mop, and bucket, obviously not surprised by his early arrival. "Mornin', Cal," she called over the sound of the beaters.

"Good mornin', Marilyn," Cal said, tipping an imaginary cap at her, like he always did. Only difference was that usually they said, "Good afternoon," to each other.

Cal liked Marilyn. She never said much. Never smiled much, but never frowned, either. She looked a bit like Kathy Bates, in any of Kathy Bates's non-crazy roles.

Marilyn was a tough, sturdy gal, an ex-Navy cook. Cal had never asked her but he guessed that Marilyn had gotten her job the same way

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he'd gotten his: by taking her military resume with her to the Department of Defense offices across the Bay in San Francisco.

"Good day for cleaning up," Cal said.

"That it is," Marilyn replied, shutting off the mixer.

Cal swept the cafeteria floor and was just finishing mopping when two young men in white coats showed up for lunch. The lab rats. They had to be. Even R & D with the D.O.D. allowed the condemned a last meal. None of the other white coats would be taking time to eat today, but they'd be sure that these two got a bite.

Last year's lab rats had been gleaming-blond Aryan types. Cal had guessed they spoke fluent German even before he'd seen the Nazi carriage two floors down.

These two were more of a mixed bag.

The Anglo kid was disjointedly lanky, with plain brown hair. Cal knew he'd seen the kid around the subbasement complex sporting a full mustache and a struggling beard. The kid had shaved off the trimmings — undoubtedly ordered to for the experiment. Or mission. Whatever they'd told the poor bastard. Now the area of his upper lip and chin stood out paler than the rest of his wan face, making him look vulnerable.

The other guy was a young Korean-American. Cal remembered him a little better. A good-looking, golden-faced kid with the sort of thick, shiny black hair that never thins to baldness. He radiated both respectfulness and self-confidence. The Brass must have just loved this guy.

For the life of him, Cal couldn't figure out where the Brass were going to try to send these two. If they wore any of their period clothing for the trip, the lab coats and scrub-room overpants hid it.

The lab rats bellied up to the table with the heated chafing dishes. Pale kid raised one of the rounded covers and Cal got a big warm whiff of tender pot roast. Marilyn didn't fix pot roast often, but when she did it was food for the gods. The other two chafing dishes held buttery, sage-perfumed pork chops on steamed collards and Chicken Kiev on wild rice.

Once they loaded up their plates and their trays, the kids swiped their I.D. cards through the charge slot at Marilyn's register. They seated themselves at the far end of the cafeteria where the floor had already dried.

Cal put his mop in the bucket to soak, washed his hands in the men's

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lavatory just outside the cafeteria, then came back in and went over to the do-it-yourself food station to make himself a sandwich.

Marilyn was spreading the chocolate on top of a cake. She nodded toward the chafing dishes and their perfumed aromas. "Help yourself, Cal. They left plenty."

Cal shook his head. "No, thanks. They might want seconds." Then he added, too quietly for Marilyn's workers to hear, just in case they were listening, "Dead men walking."

Marilyn raised her eyebrows a tad and shrugged. She came out from behind the counter carrying a wide platter filled to its edges by a tall angel food cake with milk chocolate frosting. She placed it on the serving station next to the chafing dish table, in direct line-of-sight to the lab rats. They couldn't fail to see it. "I wish I could put out some good wine or beer for them," she said to Cal. "It doesn't seem fair. Pretty cold, even for the D.O.D., to pull this on them just before Christmas."

Cal nodded. He doubted, however, that the holidays made much of a difference. At least not to these two kids. After the very first experiment, he felt pretty sure that all lab rats had been chosen, not just for their talents and skills, but also on the basis of a lack of family baggage. For sure no spouses or children. Parents probably dead or the patriotic blinkered sort who'd buy being told that their children were secretly M.I.A. in glorious service to their country. Probably not even brothers or sisters. Or aunts or uncles — at least not close enough to care.

Cal took his tray to sit a few tables away from the kids. Then he picked it up again and stood, indecisive, thinking. Finally he walked over to their table. He couldn't help a small smile when he saw their plates heaped to overflowing with Marilyn's fabulous grub. He'd forgotten what it was like to be that young and that hungry.

"Awfully empty in here today. Mind if I join you?"

The two lab rats looked up, surprised. Cal knew that usually nobody ruffled the smooth waters of the facility's caste system. Physicists broke bread with physicists. The security spooks ate with the other security spooks.

But this was Berkeley after all, or close enough to it — Emeryville. Up top and outside of the hidden D.O.D. complex, polite counterculture manners tended to dominate. Besides, these two had probably lived in the

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area at least long enough to know that a raggedy-ass, skinny, hippie-looking old guy working as a janitor *could* turn out to be a hallowed-but-burned-out poet laureate in disguise. Or something.

The Korean kid spoke first. "Sure, man." He smiled. Nicely. "Have a seat. Take a load off."

Awkward Anglo Boy scrambled to push a chair out for Cal. Up close, the kid's eyes matched his hair. Except they weren't a plain brown. They glowed with intelligence.

Cal felt even worse for these boys. Good kids. Helluva thing.

Cal took a couple of bites of his sandwich; chewed, swallowed, then spoke. "So, today's the big day," he said — a statement, not a question. "Anybody wished you bon voyage yet?"

The lab rats stared at him nervously.

Cal waved his hand. "It's all right. I've been working here, in this building, for almost thirty years. I've seen it all."

They still looked a little anxious but somewhat reassured. And curious. They were too smart not to figure out instantly that anybody who'd been around for thirty years might have interesting tales to tell. The sort of tales the Brass would have declined to share with them. Cal wondered if they'd ever been curious about the sealed and blocked-off rooms downstairs.

He knew they had to be searching their brains for anything they might have heard about him. If they came up with anything, it would be info readily available: That he wasn't an abdicated poet laureate, but instead a worn-out old Viet Nam vet that the D.O.D. had taken pity on and given this thankless but steady employment to, back when he'd already been worn-out but no older than they were now.

But that wasn't even the half of it. The only reason he'd joined the army in the first place was for the G. I. Bill, to go to college — just about the only option a poor and silly kid from the Midwest who wanted to go to school to learn to be a film director had in those days. But nobody here knew anything about that. Or cared.

Cal took the initiative again. "Look. I'm not going to ask. I don't *want* to know. But just think about something, will you? Wherever they're sending you to...to *whenever* they're sending you...." He paused, started over one more time. "Whatever it is they want you to do, it's big, right?

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Both kids looked ready to jump clean out of their lab coats and scrub pants.

Cal waved his hands. "Seriously. I don't want to know. I don't want to talk you out of anything. Or into anything. I just want you to think about something. Can you hear me out? Look at me." He spread his hands, indicating his gray custodian's uniform. "What could it hurt?"

They both settled back down: The Korean kid nodded cautiously.

"Look, whatever they've been doing, you have to have figured out that it hasn't been going too well. Otherwise the world would be a lot better place, right?"

Their faces looked frozen but Cal got the feeling that they were still nodding in agreement, somewhere deep inside.

"I'm not saying that they're wrong. But maybe they're trying just too hard. Trying too damned big. Going too far back."

The brown-haired kid's eyes narrowed, but in concentration, not disapproval.

Encouraged, Cal reached hard to come up with an example. Not the Holocaust. That would strike too close to home. Way too recent. He'd bet good money that last year's blond lab rats had been sent back to pull off everybody's favorite fantasy of an assassination.

"Okay, back a bunch of hundred years ago, the Huns tore up a lot of Eastern Europe. They say Attila and his crew piled skulls into heaps so high that you could rest whole caravans in their shade.

"Now imagine if somebody went back and arranged for Attila to catch a nasty virus, something like the Spanish Flu, and he keeled over before he got the chance to organize his hordes. *Really* think about it. That would mean thousands of people who died would've lived to raise hundreds of thousands, millions of descendants, any *one* of who could have made an enormous difference in the world. Likely a whole *bunch* of them would have made big differences. There's no way to know how that would all shake down. It's just too danged big, right?"

The lab rats still looked at him with mesmerized expressions.

"But what if you went back not so far? Not too far? And did something really small. Didn't kill or kidnap or take any viruses with you or anything like that. Maybe just have a cup of coffee with somebody. Or have a nice chat with a stranger while waiting in line at the supermarket. Or get your

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car in front of them at a toll booth and pay forward for them, so they'd be in a great frame of mind on a particular day."

"But how would you know, then?" Anglo Boy blurted out. The Korean kid looked at him sharply, must have kicked him under the table because Anglo Boy glared at his partner. He turned back to Cal. "How would you know you'd accomplished your goal?"

"You might not at first," Cal conceded. He watched the interest start to die in their eyes. Why volunteer, why take a chance with your life if you couldn't tell if you'd made a difference?

"But you might," he added quickly. "And the differences would show up in what might seem like little things to most folks."

Doubt darkened their gaze.

"I may be just a janitor," Cal said, desperate to hang on to them. "But even I can see, by looking at just the little things, how everything is totally screwed up — even if I never picked up a paper or watched the news on TV.

"Look, just as an example: Think of how many movies you've seen that could have been great, but they wrecked the screenplay when they didn't have to. Or terrific films that never got released, that are mouldering somewhere in cans. Or casting that makes no earthly sense at all. Or people who died before their time. Before doing their best work."

"You mean like Christopher Reeve?" the brown-haired kid said.

Encouraged, Cal nodded. "Exactly."

But the Korean kid folded his arms over his chest, raised his eyebrows in an *Oh yeah? Prove it to me — I know you can't,* manner.

Cal scrambled. He ticked off samples from his list.

"Movies that could have been great: *Face Off* with Nicolas Cage and John Travolta. Fantastic acting by both of them. Cage *was* the transformed Travolta, and Travolta the transformed Cage. But the film resolved itself by them having different blood types. Any moron knows that their switched faces would have started crawling off their skulls before the swap was even finished. There *was* a perfect solution: Give them the same blood type, O positive, then reveal their true identities through retinal scans, since their eyeballs weren't exchanged. But somebody got lazy in the script-writing department.

"Miscasting. Did you ever see *Superman II*? On video or DVD? For Christ's sake, they've got *Gene Hackman* as Lex Luther. Wearing a *curly*

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wig for part of it. Gene Hackman is a good actor. A great actor. But as Lex Luther? What was up with *that*?

"And why hasn't anybody made a movie with Billy Crystal, Tom Hanks, and Michael Keaton cast as brothers? Or a movie with Karen Black and Juliette Lewis as grandmother and granddaughter?" He could see he was losing the two kids. Losing them.

Cal talked faster, though he knew he shouldn't. He couldn't help himself. "Movies mouldering in cans, never released. Did you ever hear the legend that Metro Goldwyn Mayer shot a movie of *Vanity Fair* with Marilyn Monroe as Becky Sharp? Her performance was supposed to be brilliant, shrewd, transcendent. Oscar-worthy. But the part had Marilyn acting so against type that the studio decided it was unmarketable. Nobody knows where it went to."

Both the lab rats now held down smiles. Going, going, gone.

One last ditch effort. "Okay, okay — I know all that seems silly, that movies don't count. They're just an example. What I'm trying to say is that it's like that butterfly effect thing. Some small and kind action will have a big reverberation and give you better odds for ending up with a better world. If the little things start showing up the way they should, then the whole can't help but become more than the sum of its parts. Forget movies. Think of things that *you* really dig, and how they could have turned out better."

"That's a very interesting theory," the Korean kid said, all politeness. They'd finished up their plates during Cal's rant. "I hope you'll excuse us, but we've got to get back to work soon and I see a big cake with our name on it." He and Anglo Boy pushed back their chairs, got up and headed for their last dessert. Cal knew they wanted him gone by the time they returned to the table. The brown-haired lab rat looked over his shoulder and said with sympathy, "It's a nice idea to think about."

Cal clocked out at 2:30 P.M. The marine layer, which would have burned off by noon, had already rolled back in from the San Francisco Bay, leaving the air dank and chill. He walked up to San Pablo Avenue past old brick warehouses remodeled and gentrified into architect offices, upscale handmade furniture manufacturers, a Pilates center; each with its door painted either a crisp glossy black or hunter green. He caught

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a north-bound bus and asked for his usual transfer stub. At University Avenue he got off. The corner of University and San Pablo still retained a pre-gentrification, down-at-the heels shabbiness. A few street people loitered in front of the cheap-shoes store on the corner. The faint smell of pot lingered, as always, around the bus bench. Cal caught the number fifty-one. It took him up alongside U.C. Berkeley and then turned down College Avenue and past Berkeley's stately bungalows with their shingled houses, toward upper Oakland. He lived in a one bedroom apartment over a bakery in the Rockridge Area — a little seedier than Berkeley, but not by much. The art school at Broadway and College Avenue helped the neighborhood retain a laid-back Bohemian charm.

As the bus drove along University Avenue, Cal took in what passed for holiday decorations in Berkeley. Some green and silver tinsel and red ribbons on the street lights. Hanging blue and white Stars of David for Chanukah graced some of the old stucco buildings. Yellow, green, and brown tribal harvest symbols for Kwanza. Pleasant, tasteful, low key. If the lab rats succeeded at the experiment this time, Cal wondered if he'd wake up tomorrow to more holiday trimmings or fewer holiday trimmings.

The always-jammed intersection at Shattuck Avenue loomed ahead. Cal looked to his right. Immense scaffolding covered the better part of a city block, obscuring what had been the U.C. Theater — a funky ancient repertory movie house that had screened old films for years upon years. A favorite haunt of Cal's, it had shown flicks of all sorts, from near and far, popular and obscure, from the excellent to the dreadful. Now the place was gutted, killed, its corpse awaiting rebirth as graceless condos or the undeath of corporate offices. Cal closed his eyes. His chest hurt. Bah, humbug.

HE GOT UP the next morning at 4:00 A.M., like he always did. He fixed himself a bowl of cereal and drank a glass of orange juice and a cup of good coffee, then dressed, pocketed his clearance badge, and caught the earliest number fifty-one bus back to work.

The sky was still night-dark outside when he clocked in at 5:30 A.M. Cal emptied the wastebaskets and cleaned the offices and labs as much as

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he could before the facility's personnel started sifting in between eight and nine A.M. Usually he started at the first subbasement floor and worked his way down to the third subbasement floor. Today he reversed the order. He wanted to find out what had happened to the lab rats.

Cal knew as soon as he stepped off the elevator. Most of the white-coated personnel still lingered on the third floor. They weren't flapping about anymore. They looked depressed, exhausted, talked among themselves in subdued tones. Cal picked up a wide-brushed broom and a dust pan and walked past the experiment on his way to the vacant and not-yet-sealed rooms on the other side. Through the glass windows he saw the metal tubing of the sledge standing lonely and empty in the middle of the big glass cube. The boat and the lab rats hadn't come back.

Just like the Volkswagen carriage and the two Aryan lab rats that hadn't returned the year before. Just like the earlier three carriages that hadn't come back either.

The technicians and engineers were wrapping things up. Much of the equipment had already been hauled away, back to the separate departments to be taken apart, dissected, analyzed. Only one bank of equipment remained, set up against the middle of the wall. It included the two chronometers and the toggle switch.

Cal walked back down the hall and trudged up the stairway two floors. After an hour of working on the first subfloor he took the elevator back down. Everybody else was gone now. They'd done all they could for the moment. Just like after the other failures.

Cal swept the four rooms on the other side of the experiment room. Later today, or tomorrow at the latest, some of the technicians would return. They'd take out the last stainless steel console, the one with the chronometers and switch. In its place they'd embed sensors into the wall and leave a get-the-coffin-open transmitter set to a code that only the lab rats knew. Just in case Anglo Boy and Korean Kid ever returned. Then the techs would seal the doors and ventilation systems so tight it looked like it would take an atom bomb to break out. Cal didn't know what they thought might ride the carriage back instead of any of the lab rats, but obviously the possibilities scared them. The specially fabricated fused windows were already secure. All the techs had to do was black them out.

Sweeping done, Cal needed to go back to the janitor's closet for his

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mop and bucket. He glanced into the window as he passed. It would probably be the last time he'd set eyes on the interior of that particular room.

He stopped. Stared. Dropped his broom and dustpan and ran into the room.

The little boat sat on the receiving sled.

Cal opened the door in the glass booth and rushed to the boat. It looked a tad battered but it rested in its cradle in one piece. Nobody huddled on the bottom, though. Neither of the two lab rats. On the other hand, Cal saw no signs of blood or violence and the planking that hid the time travel mechanism hadn't been breached, at least as far as he could tell. He stepped back from the boat, looked at it and thought for five minutes.

He left the booth and walked over to the two chronometers. The one on the right was set to the present time. The one on left was set to a time in the past. He looked at it closely. Ah. So that was the "when" they'd been sent back to. It didn't surprise Cal that they hadn't come back. But he was astonished by the boat's return.

He thought for another ten minutes or so. Then he reset the date and time on the Past chronometer. He left the experiment room and walked down to the Control Center, swiping his pass badge to get in. He rummaged around for a while. Dr. Williams and the rest of them would be surprised how much he knew about machinery. After 'Nam he *had* taken advantage of the G. I. Bill and gone to school, and after that had worked as a grip on a few movies. Until he realized that the film industry was as rotten at its core as anything else in life. Hard to accept that he'd survived the war just for the privilege of coming to that conclusion. That's when he'd given up.

Cal found a timer and returned to the room. He figured that just like rocket launches, there must be a countdown once they threw the main toggle. But just to be sure he rigged the timer to throw the switch. He entered the glass booth and climbed into the boat with plenty of time to spare. He didn't worry about his clothes — a janitor is a janitor pretty much everywhere. Everywhen. And he was taking his own advice and not going all that far back. The fifties would do just fine.

* * *

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The room flashed. Not with light. Not with darkness. It flashed with an absence of everything. When the flash stopped, Cal and the boat had vanished.

Five minutes passed on the Present chronometer.

The room strobed again. This time when it stopped, the boat, with Cal in it, reappeared. Cal looked tired, hungry, in need of a bath, his beard maybe three days scruffier.

He clambered with stiff limbs out of the boat, patting it before he left the glass booth. He hobbled a bit as he walked over to the Past chronometer and set it back to its original setting. Cal flipped the switch, endured again the instant of nothingness while the boat disappeared one last time. He figured the two kids must have listened to him at least a little, or the boat wouldn't have come back at all from their trip. Maybe the boat would return to them — they deserved at least that much of a chance.

Cal put away his broom and his dustpan and rode the elevator up to the first subbasement floor. From there he jig-jogged down a crooked corridor to the only elevator that connected the subbasement with the rest of the building. He left a note in the Building and Grounds supervisor's box that he'd come in but didn't feel well, so he'd decided to take a sick day. Then he clocked out.

When he stepped outside the facility's front door the sky was still dark but lightening to the same slate gray as the waters of the Bay. Just one day left till the Winter Solstice — the longest night of the year. Cal walked up to San Pablo Avenue and caught the bus to the intersection with University Avenue, empty of street people at this early hour. As he waited for the number fifty-one to arrive he looked over the bank of news-vending boxes behind the bus stop benches. He put some change in the slot of one of them and opened it to take out the holiday issue of the *Berkeley Monthly*, featuring its end-of-the-year wrap-up of music, films, and art. Cal riffled his thumb through it for a moment without looking, then made himself tuck it under his arm. Time to really study it when he got home, he told himself. But the blood in his veins tingled. He couldn't help wondering. What would he find? A review of a new film directed by River Phoenix? Would Jim Henson, venerable but spry, have concocted another muppety bit of enchantment for the pleasure of children young and old? If he found

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those sorts of things in the pages of the *Monthly* he knew he wouldn't have to look at any front page headlines. Cal shivered not from the winter's morning chill but from anticipation. In that instant he remembered what it had been like to be a child at Christmas: Waking with a bright heart, knowing that the greatest gift was that for that one day the impossible might be possible.

The number fifty-one pulled up. Cal climbed the bus steps and handed the bus driver his transfer stub. "Long night, huh, Bub?" the bus driver said.

Cal's smile was weary. "You have no idea," he said.

When they approached the Shattuck Avenue intersection, Cal looked to his right.

Just like yesterday, the U.C. Theater sat darkened, but the scaffolding was gone and the theater's marquee returned, the ticket booth back in place. Before they left for the night the staff always posted the next day's movie on the marquee so that Berkeley commuters could take note of the coming night's billing on their way to work in the morning. Cal's eyes widened when he read the title for this coming evening's film. Something lifted inside him just as the sun rose over the East Bay hills. He crooned a fragment of a Christmas carol and mumbled-sang to himself, "Peace on Earth, Good will to all...." Tonight the U.C. Theater would screen the 1980 film *Superman II*, starring Christopher Reeve as Superman and Telly Savalas as Lex Luther.

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Our first story in this issue took us back in time to historic England. Here's another tale that does the same, albeit in a very different manner.

Mr. Kessel says that his latest collection of short fiction, The Baum Plan for Financial Independence and Other Stories, *is due to be published in April. He also notes that an anthology he coedited with James Patrick Kelly,* Rewired: The Post-Cyberpunk Anthology, *has just been published.*

Pride and Prometheus

By John Kessel

HAD BOTH HER MOTHER AND her sister Kitty not insisted upon it, Miss Mary Bennet, whose interest in Nature did not extend to the Nature of Society, would not have attended the ball in Grosvenor Square. This was Kitty's season. Mrs. Bennet had despaired of Mary long ago, but still bore hopes for her younger sister, and so had set her determined mind on putting Kitty in the way of Robert Sidney of Detling Manor, who possessed a fortune of six thousand pounds a year, and was likely to be at that evening's festivities. Being obliged by her unmarried state to live with her parents, and the whims of Mrs. Bennet being what they were, although there was no earthly reason for Mary to be there, there was no good excuse for her absence.

So it was that Mary found herself in the ballroom of the great house, trussed up in a silk dress with her hair piled high, bedecked with her sister's jewels. She was neither a beauty, like her older and happily married sister Jane, nor witty, like her older and happily married sister Elizabeth, nor flirtatious, like her younger and less happily married sister

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Lydia. Awkward and nearsighted, she had never cut an attractive figure, and as she had aged she had come to see herself as others saw her. Every time Mrs. Bennet told her to stand up straight, she felt despair. Mary had seen how Jane and Elizabeth had made good lives for themselves by finding appropriate mates. But there was no air of grace or mystery about Mary, and no man ever looked upon her with admiration.

Kitty's card was full, and she had already contrived to dance once with the distinguished Mr. Sidney, whom Mary could not imagine being more tedious. Hectically glowing, Kitty was certain that this was the season she would get a husband. Mary, in contrast, sat with her mother and her Aunt Gardiner, whose good sense was Mary's only respite from her mother's silliness. After the third minuet Kitty came flying over.

"Catch your breath, Kitty!" Mrs. Bennet said. "Must you rush about like this? Who is that young man you danced with? Remember, we are here to smile on Mr. Sidney, not on some stranger. Did I see him arrive with the Lord Mayor?"

"How can I tell you what you saw, Mother?"

"Don't be impertinent."

"Yes. He is an acquaintance of the Mayor. He's from Switzerland! Mr. Clerval, on holiday."

The tall, fair-haired Clerval stood with a darker, brooding young man, both impeccably dressed in dove gray breeches, black jackets, and waistcoats, with white tie and gloves.

"Switzerland! I would not have you marry any Dutchman — though 'tis said their merchants are uncommonly wealthy. And who is that gentleman with whom he speaks?"

"I don't know, Mother — but I can find out."

Mrs. Bennet's curiosity was soon to be relieved, as the two men crossed the drawing room to the sisters and their chaperones.

"Henry Clerval, madame," the fair-haired man said, "And this is my good friend, Mr. Victor Frankenstein."

Mr. Frankenstein bowed but said nothing. He had the darkest eyes that Mary had ever encountered, and an air of being there only on obligation. Whether this was because he was as uncomfortable in these social situations as she, Mary could not tell, but his diffident air intrigued

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her. She fancied his reserve might bespeak sadness rather than pride. His manners were faultless, as was his command of English, though he spoke with a slight French accent. When he asked Mary to dance she suspected he did so only at the urging of Mr. Clerval; on the floor, once the orchestra of pianoforte, violin, and cello struck up the quadrille, he moved with some grace but no trace of a smile.

At the end of the dance, Frankenstein asked whether Mary would like some refreshment, and they crossed from the crowded ballroom to the sitting room, where he procured for her a cup of negus. Mary felt obliged to make some conversation before she should retreat to the safety of her wallflower's chair.

"What brings you to England, Mr. Frankenstein?"

"I come to meet with certain natural philosophers here in London, and in Oxford — students of magnetism."

"Oh! Then have you met Professor Langdon, of the Royal Society?"

Frankenstein looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. "How is it that you are acquainted with Professor Langdon?"

"I am not personally acquainted with him, but I am, in my small way, an enthusiast of the sciences. You are a natural philosopher?"

"I confess that I can no longer countenance the subject. But yes, I did study with Mr. Krempe and Mr. Waldman in Ingolstadt."

"You no longer countenance the subject, yet you seek out Mr. Langdon."

A shadow swept over Mr. Frankenstein's handsome face. "It is unsupportable to me, yet pursue it I must."

"A paradox."

"A paradox that I am unable to explain, Miss Bennet."

All this said in a voice heavy with despair. Mary watched his sober black eyes, and replied, "'The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.'"

For the second time that evening he gave her a look that suggested an understanding. Frankenstein sipped from his cup, then spoke: "Avoid any pastime, Miss Bennet, that takes you out of the normal course of human contact. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste for simple pleasures, then that study is certainly unlawful."

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The purport of this extraordinary speech Mary was unable to fathom. "Surely there is no harm in seeking knowledge."

Mr. Frankenstein smiled. "Henry has been urging me to go out into London society; had I known that I might meet such a thoughtful person as yourself I would have taken him up on it long ere now."

He took her hand. "But I spy your aunt at the door," he said. "No doubt she has been dispatched to protect you. If you will, please let me return you to your mother. I must thank you for the dance, and even more for your conversation, Miss Bennet. In the midst of a foreign land, you have brought me a moment of sympathy."

And again Mary sat beside her mother and aunt as she had half an hour before. She was nonplused. It was not seemly for a stranger to speak so much from the heart to a woman he had never previously met, yet she could not find it in herself to condemn him. Rather, she felt her own failure in not keeping him longer.

A cold March rain was falling when, after midnight, they left the ball. They waited under the portico while the coachman brought round the carriage. Kitty began coughing. As they stood there in the chill night, Mary noticed a hooded man, of enormous size, standing in the shadows at the corner of the lane. Full in the downpour, unmoving, he watched the town house and its partiers without coming closer or going away, as if this observation were all his intention in life. Mary shivered.

In the carriage back to Aunt Gardiner's home near Belgravia, Mrs. Bennet insisted that Kitty take the lap robe against the chill. "Stop coughing, Kitty. Have a care for my poor nerves." She added, "They should never have put the supper at the end of that long hallway. The young ladies, flushed from the dance, had to walk all that cold way."

Kitty drew a ragged breath and leaned over to Mary. "I have never seen you so taken with a man, Mary. What did that Swiss gentleman say to you?"

"We spoke of natural philosophy."

"Did he say nothing of the reasons he came to England?" Aunt Gardiner asked.

"That was his reason."

"Hardly!" said Kitty. "He came to forget his grief! His little brother William was murdered, not six months ago, by the family maid!"

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"How terrible!" said Aunt Gardiner.

Mrs. Bennet asked in open astonishment, "Could this be true?"

"I have it from Lucy Copeland, the Lord Mayor's daughter," Kitty replied. "Who heard it from Mr. Clerval himself. And there is more! He is engaged to be married — to his cousin. Yet he has abandoned her, left her in Switzerland and come here instead."

"Did he say anything to you about these matters?" Mrs. Bennet asked Mary.

Kitty interrupted. "Mother, he's not going to tell the family secrets to strangers, let alone reveal his betrothal at a dance."

Mary wondered at these revelations. Perhaps they explained Mr. Frankenstein's odd manner. But could they explain his interest in her? "A man should be what he seems," she said.

Kitty snorted, and it became a cough.

"Mark me, girls," said Mrs. Bennet, "that engagement is a match that he does not want. I wonder what fortune he would bring to a marriage?"

IN THE DAYS that followed, Kitty's cough became a full-blown catarrh, and it was decided against her protest that, the city air being unhealthy, they should cut short their season and return to Meryton. Mr. Sidney was undoubtedly unaware of his narrow escape. Mary could not honestly say that she regretted leaving, though the memory of her half hour with Mr. Frankenstein gave her as much regret at losing the chance of further commerce with him as she had ever felt from her acquaintance with a man.

Within a week Kitty was feeling better, and repining bitterly their remove from London. In truth, she was only two years younger than Mary and had made none of the mental accommodations to approaching spinsterhood that her older sister had attempted. Mr. Bennet retreated to his study, emerging only at mealtimes to cast sardonic comments about Mrs. Bennet and Kitty's marital campaigns. Perhaps, Mrs. Bennet said, they might invite Mr. Sidney to visit Longbourn when Parliament adjourned. Mary escaped these discussions by practicing the pianoforte and, as the advancing spring brought warm weather, taking walks in the

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countryside, where she would stop beneath an oak and read, indulging her passion for Goethe and German philosophy. When she tried to engage her father in speculation, he warned her, "I am afraid, my dear, that your understanding is too dependent on books and not enough on experience of the world. Beware, Mary. Too much learning makes a woman monstrous."

What experience of the world had they ever allowed her? Rebuffed, Mary wrote to Elizabeth about the abrupt end of Kitty's latest assault on marriage, and her subsequent ill temper, and Elizabeth wrote back inviting her two younger sisters to come visit Pemberley.

Mary was overjoyed to have the opportunity to escape her mother and see something more of Derbyshire, and Kitty seemed equally willing. Mrs. Bennet was not persuaded when Elizabeth suggested that nearby Matlock and its baths might be good for Kitty's health (no man would marry a sickly girl), but she was persuaded by Kitty's observation that, though it could in no way rival London, Matlock did attract a finer society than sleepy Meryton, and thus offered opportunities for meeting eligible young men of property. So in the second week of May, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet tearfully loaded their last unmarried daughters into a coach for the long drive to Derbyshire. Mrs. Bennet's tears were shed because their absence would deprive Kitty and Mary of her attentions, Mr. Bennet's for the fact that their absence would assure him of Mrs. Bennet's.

The two girls were as ever delighted by the grace and luxury of Pemberley, Mr. Darcy's ancestral estate. Darcy was kindness itself, and the servants attentive, if, at the instruction of Elizabeth, less indulgent of Kitty's whims and more careful of her health than the thoroughly cowed servants at home. Lizzy saw that Kitty got enough sleep, and the three sisters took long walks in the grounds of the estate. Kitty's health improved, and Mary's spirits rose. Mary enjoyed the company of Lizzy and Darcy's eight-year-old son William, who was attempting to teach her and Darcy's younger sister Georgiana to fish. Georgiana pined after her betrothed, Captain Broadbent, who was away on crown business in the Caribbean, but after they had been there a week, Jane and her husband Mr. Bingley came for an extended visit from their own estate thirty miles away, and so four of the five Bennet sisters were reunited. They spent

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many cordial afternoons and evenings. Both Mary and Georgiana were accomplished at the pianoforte, though Mary had come to realize that her sisters tolerated more than enjoyed her playing. The reunion of Lizzy and Jane meant even more time devoted to Kitty's improvement, with specific attention to her marital prospects, and left Mary feeling invisible. Still, on occasion she would join them and drive into Lambton or Matlock to shop and socialize, and every week during the summer a ball was held in the assembly room of the Old Bath Hotel, with its beeswax polished floor and splendid chandeliers.

On one such excursion to Matlock, Georgiana stopped at the milliners while Kitty pursued some business at the butcher's shop — Mary wondered at her sudden interest in Pemberley's domestic affairs — and Mary took William to the museum and circulating library, which contained celebrated cabinets of natural history. William had told her of certain antiquities unearthed in the excavation for a new hotel and recently added to the collection.

The streets, hotels, and inns of Matlock bustled with travelers there to take the waters. Newly wedded couples leaned on one another's arms, whispering secrets that no doubt concerned the alpine scenery. A crew of workmen was breaking up the cobblestone street in front of the hall, swinging pickaxes in the bright sun. Inside she and Will retreated to the cool quiet of the public exhibition room.

Among the visitors to the museum Mary spied a slender, well-dressed man at one of the display cases, examining the artifacts contained there. As she drew near, Mary recognized him. "Mr. Frankenstein!"

The tall European looked up, startled. "Ah — Miss Bennet?"

She was pleased that he remembered. "Yes. How good to see you."

"And this young man is?"

"My nephew, William."

At the mention of this name, Frankenstein's expression darkened. He closed his eyes. "Are you not well?" Mary asked.

He looked at her again. "Forgive me. These antiquities call to mind sad associations. Give me a moment."

"Certainly," she said. William ran off to see the hall's steam clock. Mary turned and examined the contents of the neighboring cabinet.

Beneath the glass was a collection of bones that had been unearthed

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in the local lead mines. The card lettered beside them read: *Bones, resembling those of a fish, made of limestone.*

Eventually Frankenstein came to stand beside her. "How is it that you are come to Matlock?" he inquired.

"My sister Elizabeth is married to Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, of Pemberley. Kitty and I are here on a visit. Have you come to take the waters?"

"Clerval and I are on our way to Scotland, where he will stay with friends, while I pursue — certain investigations. We rest here a week. The topography of the valley reminds me of my home in Switzerland."

"I have heard it said so," she replied. Frankenstein seemed to have regained his composure, but Mary wondered still at what had awakened his grief. "You have an interest in these relics?" she asked, indicating the cabinets.

"Some, perhaps. I find it remarkable to see a young lady take an interest in such arcana." Mary detected no trace of mockery in his voice.

"Indeed, I do," she said, indulging her enthusiasm. "Professor Erasmus Darwin has written of the source of these bones:

"Organic life beneath the shoreless waves
Was born and nurs'd in ocean's pearly caves;
First forms minute, unseen by spheric glass,
Move on the mud, or pierce the watery mass;
These, as successive generations bloom,
New powers acquire and larger limbs assume;
Whence countless groups of vegetation spring,
And breathing realms of fin and feet and wing.

"People say this offers proof of the great flood. Do you think, Mr. Frankenstein, that Matlock could once have been under the sea? They say these are creatures that have not existed since the time of Noah."

"Far older than the flood, I'll warrant. I do not think that these bones were originally made of stone. Some process has transformed them. Anatomically, they are more like those of a lizard than a fish."

"You have studied anatomy?"

Mr. Frankenstein tapped his fingers upon the glass of the case. "Three years gone by it was one of my passions. I no longer pursue such matters."

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"And yet, sir, you met with men of science in London."

"Ah — yes, I did. I am surprised that you remember a brief conversation, more than two months ago."

"I have a good memory."

"As evidenced by your quoting Professor Darwin. I might expect a woman such as yourself to take more interest in art than science."

"Oh, you may rest assured that I have read my share of novels. And even more, in my youth, of sermons. Elizabeth is wont to tease me for a great moralizer. 'Evil is easy,' I tell her, 'and has infinite forms.'"

Frankenstein did not answer. Finally he said, "Would that the world had no need of moralizers."

Mary recalled his warning against science from their London meeting. "Come, Mr. Frankenstein. There is no evil in studying God's handiwork."

"A God-fearing Christian might take exception to Professor Darwin's assertion that life began in the sea, no matter how poetically stated." His voice became distant. "Can a living soul be created without the hand of God?"

"It is my feeling that the hand of God is everywhere present." Mary gestured toward the cabinet. "Even in the bones of this stony fish."

"Then you have more faith than I, Miss Bennet — or more innocence."

Mary blushed. She was not used to bantering in this way with a gentleman. In her experience, handsome and accomplished men took no interest in her, and such conversations as she had engaged in offered little of substance other than the weather, clothes, and town gossip. Yet she saw that she had touched Frankenstein, and felt something akin to triumph.

They were interrupted by the appearance of Georgiana and Kitty, entering with Henry Clerval. "There you are!" said Kitty. "You see, Mr. Clerval, I told you we would find Mary poring over these heaps of bones!"

"And it is no surprise to find my friend here as well," said Clerval.

Mary felt quite deflated. The party moved out of the town hall and in splendid sunlight along the North Parade. Kitty proposed, and the visitors acceded to, a stroll on the so-called Lover's Walk beside the river. As they walked along the gorge, vast ramparts of limestone rock, clothed with yew trees, elms, and limes, rose up on either side of the river. William ran

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ahead, and Kitty, Georgiana, and Clerval followed, leaving Frankenstein and Mary behind. Eventually they came in sight of the High Tor, a sheer cliff rearing its brow on the east bank of the Derwent. The lower part was covered with small trees and foliage. Massive boulders that had fallen from the cliff broke the riverbed below into foaming rapids. The noise of the waters left Mary and Frankenstein, apart from the others, as isolated as if they had been in a separate room. Frankenstein spent a long time gazing at the scenery. Mary's mind raced, seeking some way to recapture the mood of their conversation in the town hall.

"How this reminds me of my home," he said. "Henry and I would climb such cliffs as this, chase goats around the meadows and play at pirates. Father would walk me though the woods and name every tree and flower. I once saw a lightning bolt shiver an old oak to splinters."

"Whenever I come here," Mary blurted out, "I realize how small I am, and how great time is. We are here for only seconds, and then we are gone, and these rocks, this river, will long survive us. And through it all we are alone."

Frankenstein turned toward her. "Surely you are not so lonely. You have your family, your sisters. Your mother and father."

"One can be alone in a room of people. Kitty mocks me for my 'heaps of bones.'"

"A person may marry."

"I am twenty-eight years old, sir. I am no man's vision of a lover or wife."

What had come over her, to say this aloud, for the first time in her life? Yet what did it matter what she said to this foreigner? There was no point in letting some hope for sympathy delude her into greater hopes. They had danced a single dance in London, and now they spent an afternoon together; soon he would leave England, marry his cousin, and Mary would never see him again. She deserved Kitty's mockery.

Frankenstein took some time before answering, during which Mary was acutely aware of the sound of the waters, and of the sight of Georgiana, William, and Clerval playing in the grass by the riverbank, while Kitty stood pensive some distance away.

"Miss Bennet, I am sorry if I have made light of your situation. But your fine qualities should be apparent to anyone who took the trouble truly to make your acquaintance. Your knowledge of matters of science only adds to my admiration."

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"You needn't flatter me," said Mary. "I am unused to it."

"I do not flatter," Frankenstein replied. "I speak my own mind."

William came running up. "Aunt Mary! This would be an excellent place to fish! We should come here with Father!"

"That's a good idea, Will."

Frankenstein turned to the others. "We must return to the hotel, Henry," he told Clerval. "I need to see that new glassware properly packed before shipping it ahead."

"Very well."

"Glassware?" Georgiana asked.

Clerval chuckled. "Victor has been purchasing equipment at every stop along our tour — glassware, bottles of chemicals, lead and copper disks. The coachmen threaten to leave us behind if he does not ship these things separately."

Kitty argued in vain, but the party walked back to Matlock. The women and William met the carriage to take them back to Pemberley. "I hope I see you again, Miss Bennet," Frankenstein said. Had she been more accustomed to reading the emotions of others she would have ventured that his expression held sincere interest — even longing.

On the way back to Pemberley William prattled with Georgiana, Kitty, subdued for once, leaned back with her eyes closed, while Mary puzzled over every moment of the afternoon. The fundamental sympathy she had felt with Frankenstein in their brief London encounter had been only reinforced. His sudden dark moods, his silences, bespoke some burden he carried. Mary was almost convinced that her mother was right — that Frankenstein did not love his cousin, and that he was here in England fleeing from her. How could this second meeting with him be chance? Fate had brought them together.

At dinner that evening, Kitty told Darcy and Elizabeth about their encounter with the handsome Swiss tourists. Later, Mary took Lizzy aside and asked her to invite Clerval and Frankenstein to dinner.

"This is new!" said Lizzy. "I expected this from Kitty, but not you. You have never before asked to have a young man come to Pemberley."

"I have never met someone quite like Mr. Frankenstein," Mary replied.

* * *

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"Have you taken the Matlock waters?" Mary asked Clerval, who was seated opposite her at the dinner table. "People in the parish say that a dip in the hot springs could raise the dead."

"I confess that I have not," Clerval said. "Victor does not believe in their healing powers."

Mary turned to Frankenstein, hoping to draw him into discussion of the matter, but the startled expression on his face silenced her.

The table, covered with a blinding white damask tablecloth, glittered with silver and crystal. A large epergne, studded with lit beeswax candles, dominated its center. In addition to the family members, and in order to even the number of guests and balance female with male, Darcy and Elizabeth had invited the vicar, Mr. Chatsworth. Completing the dinner party were Bingley and Jane, Georgiana, and Kitty.

The footmen brought soup, followed by claret, turbot with lobster and Dutch sauce, oyster pate, lamb cutlets with asparagus, peas, a fricandeau à l'oseille, venison, stewed beef à la jardinière, with various salads, beetroot, French and English mustard. Two ices, cherry water and pine-apple cream, and a chocolate cream with strawberries. Champagne flowed throughout the dinner, and Madeira afterward.

Darcy inquired of Mr. Clerval's business in England, and Clerval told of his meetings with men of business in London, and his interest in India. He had even begun the study of the language, and for their entertainment spoke a few sentences in Hindi. Darcy told of his visit to Geneva a decade ago. Clerval spoke charmingly of the differences in manners between the Swiss and the English, with witty preference for English habits, except, he said, in the matter of boiled meats. Georgiana asked about women's dress on the continent. Elizabeth allowed as how, if they could keep him safe, it would be good for William's education to tour the continent. Kitty, who usually dominated the table with bright talk and jokes, was unaccustomedly quiet. The Vicar spoke amusingly of his travels in Italy.

Through all of this, Frankenstein offered little in the way of response or comment. Mary had put such hopes on this dinner, and now she feared she had misread him. His voice warmed but once, when he spoke of his father, a counselor and syndic, renowned for his integrity. Only on inquiry would he speak of his years in Ingolstadt.

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"And what did you study in the university?" Bingley asked.

"Matters of no interest," Frankenstein replied.

An uncomfortable silence followed. Clerval gently explained, "My friend devoted himself so single-mindedly to the study of natural philosophy that his health failed. I was fortunately able to bring him back to us, but it was a near thing."

"For which I will ever be grateful to you," Frankenstein mumbled.

Lizzy attempted to change the subject. "Reverend Chatsworth, what news is there of the parish?"

The vicar, unaccustomed to such volume and variety of drink, was in his cups, his face flushed and his voice rising to pulpit volume. "Well, I hope the ladies will not take it amiss," he boomed, "if I tell about a curious incident that occurred last night!"

"Pray do."

"So, then — last night I was troubled with sleeplessness — I think it was the trout I ate for supper, it was not right — Mrs. Croft vowed she had purchased it just that afternoon, but I wonder if perhaps it might have been from the previous day's catch. Be that as it may, lying awake some time after midnight, I thought I heard a scraping out my bedroom window — the weather has been so fine of late that I sleep with my window open. It is my opinion, Mr. Clerval, that nothing aids the lungs more than fresh air, and I believe that is the opinion of the best continental thinkers, is it not? The air is exceedingly fresh in the alpine meadows, I am told?"

"Only in those meadows where the cows have not been feeding."

"The cows? Oh, yes, the cows — ha, ha! — very good! The cows, indeed! So, where was I? Ah, yes. I rose from my bed and looked out the window, and what did I spy but a light in the churchyard. I threw on my robe and slippers and hurried out to see what might be the matter.

"As I approached the churchyard I saw a dark figure wielding a spade. His back was to me, silhouetted by a lamp which rested beside Nancy Brown's grave. Poor Nancy, dead not a week now, so young, only seventeen."

"A man?" said Kitty.

The vicar's round face grew serious. "You may imagine my shock. 'Halloo!' I shouted. At that the man dropped his spade, seized the lantern and dashed 'round the back of the church. By the time I had reached the

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corner he was out of sight. Back at the grave I saw that he had been on a fair way to unearthing poor Nancy's coffin!"

"My goodness!" said Jane.

"Defiling a grave?" asked Bingley. "I am astonished."

Darcy said nothing, but his look demonstrated that he was not pleased by the vicar bringing such an uncouth matter to his dinner table. Frankenstein, sitting next to Mary, put down his knife and took a long draught of Madeira.

The vicar lowered his voice. He was clearly enjoying himself. "I can only speculate on what motive this man might have had. Could it have been some lover of hers, overcome with grief?"

"No man is so faithful," Kitty said.

"My dear vicar," said Lizzy. "You have read too many of Mrs. Radcliffe's novels."

Darcy leaned back in his chair. "Gypsies have been seen in the woods about the quarry. It was no doubt their work. They were seeking jewelry."

"Jewelry?" the vicar said. "The Browns had barely enough money to see her decently buried."

"Which proves that whoever did this was not a local man."

Clerval spoke. "At home, fresh graves are sometimes defiled by men providing cadavers to doctors. Was there not a spate of such grave robbings in Ingolstadt, Victor?"

Frankenstein put down his glass. "Yes," he said. "Some anatomists, in seeking knowledge, will abandon all human scruple."

"I do not think that is likely to be the cause in this instance," Darcy observed. "Here there is no university, no medical school. Doctor Phillips, in Lambton, is no transgressor of civilized rules."

"He is scarcely a transgressor of his own threshold," said Lizzy. "One must call him a day in advance to get him to leave his parlor."

"Rest assured, there are such men," said Frankenstein. "I have known them. My illness, as Henry has described to you, was in some way my spirit's rebellion against the understanding that the pursuit of knowledge will lead some men into mortal peril."

Here was Mary's chance to impress Frankenstein. "Surely there is a nobility in risking one's life to advance the claims of one's race. With how

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many things are we upon the brink of becoming acquainted, if cowardice or carelessness did not restrain our inquiries?"

"Then I thank God for cowardice and carelessness, Miss Bennet," Frankenstein said, "One's life, perhaps, is worth risking, but not one's soul."

"True enough. But I believe that science may demand our relaxing the strictures of common society."

"We have never heard this tone from you, Mary," Jane said.

Darcy interjected, "You are becoming quite modern, sister. What strictures are you prepared to abandon for us tonight?" His voice was full of the gentle condescension with which he treated Mary at all times.

How she wished to surprise them! How she longed to show Darcy and Lizzy, with their perfect marriage and perfect lives, that she was not the simple old maid they thought her. "Anatomists in London have obtained the court's permission to dissect the bodies of criminals after execution. Is it unjust to use the body of a murderer, who has already forfeited his own life, to save the lives of the innocent?"

"My uncle, who is on the bench, has spoken of such cases," Bingley said.

"Not only that," Mary added. "Have you heard of the experiments of the Italian scientist Aldini? Last summer in London at the Royal College of Surgeons he used a powerful battery to animate portions of the body of a hanged man. According to the *Times*, the spectators genuinely believed that the body was about to come to life!"

"Mary, please!" said Lizzy.

"You need to spend less time on your horrid books," Kitty laughed. "No suitor is going to want to talk with you about dead bodies."

And so Kitty was on their side, too. Her mockery only made Mary more determined to force Frankenstein to speak. "What do you say, sir? Will you come to my defense?"

Frankenstein carefully folded his napkin and set it beside his plate. "Such attempts are not motivated by bravery, or even curiosity, but by ambition. The pursuit of knowledge can become a vice deadly as any of the more common sins. Worse still, because even the most noble of natures are susceptible to such temptations. None but he who has experienced them can conceive of the enticements of science."

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The vicar raised his glass. "Mr. Frankenstein, truer words have never been spoken. The man who defiled poor Nancy's grave has placed himself beyond the mercy of a forgiving God."

Mary felt charged with contradictory emotions. "You have experienced such enticements, Mr. Frankenstein?"

"Sadly, I have."

"But surely there is no sin that is beyond the reach of God's mercy? 'To know all is to forgive all.'"

The vicar turned to her. "My child, what know you of sin?"

"Very little, Mr. Chatsworth, except of idleness. Yet I feel that even a wicked person can have the veil lifted from his eyes."

Frankenstein looked at her. "Here I must agree with Miss Bennet. I have to believe that even the most corrupted nature is susceptible to grace. If I did not think this were possible, I could not live."

"Enough of this talk," insisted Darcy. "Vicar, I suggest you mind your parishioners, including those in the churchyard, more carefully. But now I for one am eager to hear Miss Georgiana play the pianoforte. And perhaps Miss Mary and Miss Catherine will join her. We must uphold the accomplishments of English maidenhood before our foreign guests."

ON KITTY'S INSISTENCE, the next morning, despite lowering clouds and a chill in the air that spoke more of March than late May, she and Mary took a walk along the river.

They walked along the stream that ran from the estate toward the Derwent. Kitty remained silent. Mary's thoughts turned to the wholly unsatisfying dinner of the previous night. The conversation in the parlor had gone no better than dinner. Mary had played the piano ill, showing herself to poor advantage next to the accomplished Georgiana. Under Jane and Lizzy's gaze she felt the folly of her intemperate speech at the table. Frankenstein said next to nothing to her for the rest of the evening; he almost seemed wary of being in her presence.

She was wondering how he was spending this morning when, suddenly turning her face from Mary, Kitty burst into tears.

Mary touched her arm. "Whatever is the matter, Kitty?"

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"Do you believe what you said last night?"

"What did I say?"

"That there is no sin beyond the reach of God's mercy?"

"Of course I do! Why would you ask?"

"Because I have committed such a sin!" She covered her eyes with her hand. "Oh, no, I mustn't speak of it!"

Mary refrained from pointing out that, having made such a provocative admission, Kitty could hardly remain silent — and undoubtedly had no intention of doing so. But Kitty's intentions were not always transparent to Mary.

After some coaxing and a further walk along the stream, Kitty was prepared finally to unburden herself. It seemed that, from the previous summer she had maintained a secret admiration for a local man from Matlock, Robert Piggot, son of the butcher. Though his family was quite prosperous and he stood to inherit the family business, he was in no way a gentleman, and Kitty had vowed never to let her affections overwhelm her sense.

But, upon their recent return to Pemberley, she had encountered Robert on her first visit to town, and she had been secretly meeting with him when she went into Matlock on the pretext of shopping. Worse still, the couple had allowed their passion to get the better of them, and Kitty had given way to carnal love.

The two sisters sat on a fallen tree in the woods as Kitty poured out her tale. "I want so much to marry him." Her tears flowed readily. "I do not want to be alone, I don't want to die an old maid! And Lydia — Lydia told me about — about the act of love, how wonderful it was, how good Wickham makes her feel. She boasted of it! And I said, why should vain Lydia have this, and me have nothing, to waste my youth in conversation and embroidery, in listening to Mother prattle and Father throw heavy sighs. Father thinks me a fool, unlikely ever to find a husband. And now he's right!" Kitty burst into wailing again. "He's right! No man shall ever have me!" Her tears ended in a fit of coughing.

"Oh, Kitty," Mary said.

"When Darcy spoke of English maidenhood last night, it was all I could do to keep from bursting into tears. You must get Father to agree to let me marry Robert."

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"Has he asked you to marry him?"

"He shall. He must. You don't know how fine a man he is. Despite the fact that he is in trade, he has the gentlest manners. I don't care if he is not well born."

Mary embraced Kitty. Kitty alternated between sobs and fits of coughing. Above them the thunder rumbled, and the wind rustled the trees. Mary felt Kitty's shivering body. She needed to calm her, to get her back to the house. How frail, how slender her sister was.

She did not know what to say. Once Mary would have self-righteously condemned Kitty. But much that Kitty said was the content of her own mind, and Kitty's fear of dying alone was her own fear. As she searched for some answer, Mary heard the sound of a torrent of rain hitting the canopy of foliage above them. "You have been foolish," Mary said, holding her. "But it may not be so bad."

Kitty trembled in her arms, and spoke into Mary's shoulder. "But will you ever care for me again? What if Father should turn me out? What will I do then?"

The rain was falling through now, coming down hard. Mary felt her hair getting soaked. "Calm yourself. Father would do no such thing. I shall never forsake you. Jane would not, nor Lizzy."

"What if I should have a child!"

Mary pulled Kitty's shawl over her head. She looked past Kitty's shoulder to the dark woods. Something moved there. "You shan't have a child."

"You can't know! I may!"

The woods had become dark with the rain. Mary could not make out what lurked there. "Come, let us go back. You must compose yourself. We shall speak with Lizzy and Jane. They will know — "

Just then a flash of lightning lit the forest, and Mary saw, beneath the trees not ten feet from them, the giant figure of a man. The lightning illuminated a face of monstrous ugliness: Long, thick, tangled black hair. Yellow skin the texture of dried leather, black eyes sunken deep beneath heavy brows. Worst of all, an expression hideous in its cold, inexpressible hunger. All glimpsed in a split second; then the light fell to shadow.

Mary gasped, and pulled Kitty toward her. A great peal of thunder rolled across the sky.

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Kitty stopped crying. "What is it?"

"We must go. Now." Mary seized Kitty by the arm. The rain pelted down on them, and the forest path was already turning to mud.

Mary pulled her toward the house, Kitty complaining. Mary could hear nothing over the drumming of the rain. But when she looked over her shoulder, she caught a glimpse of the brutish figure, keeping to the trees, but swiftly, silently moving along behind them.

"Why must we run?" Kitty gasped.

"Because we are being followed!"

"By whom?"

"I don't know!"

Behind them, Mary thought she heard the man croak out some words: "Halt! Bitter!"

They had not reached the edge of the woods when figures appeared ahead of them, coming from Pemberley. "Miss Bennet! Mary! Kitty!"

The figures resolved themselves into Darcy and Mr. Frankenstein. Darcy carried a cloak, which he threw over them. "Are you all right?" Frankenstein asked.

"Thank you!" Mary gasped. "A man. He's there," she pointed, "following us."

Frankenstein took a few steps beyond them down the path. "Who was it?" Darcy asked.

"Some brute. Hideously ugly," Mary said.

Frankenstein came back. "No one is there."

"We saw him!"

Another lighting flash, and crack of thunder. "It is very dark, and we are in a storm," Frankenstein said.

"Come, we must get you back to the house," Darcy said. "You are wet to the bone."

The men helped them back to Pemberley, trying their best to keep the rain off the sisters.

Darcy went off to find Bingley and Clerval, who had taken the opposite direction in their search. Lizzy saw that Mary and Kitty were made dry and warm. Kitty's cough worsened, and Lizzy insisted she must be put to bed. Mary sat with Kitty, whispered a promise to keep her secret, and waited until she slept. Then she went down to meet the others in the parlor.

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"This chill shall do her no good," Jane said. She chided Mary for wandering off in such threatening weather. "I thought you had developed more sense, Mary. Mr. Frankenstein insisted he help to find you, when he realized you had gone out into the woods."

"I am sorry," Mary said. "You are right." She was distracted by Kitty's plight, wondering what she might do. If Kitty were indeed with child, there would be no helping her.

Mary recounted her story of the man in the woods. Darcy said he had seen no one, but allowed that someone might have been there. Frankenstein, rather than engage in the speculation, stood at the tall windows staring across the lawn through the rain toward the tree line.

"This intruder was some local poacher, or perhaps one of those gypsies," said Darcy. "When the rain ends I shall have Mr. Mowbray take some men to check the grounds. We shall also inform the constable."

"I hope this foul weather will induce you to stay with us a few more days, Mr. Frankenstein," Lizzy ventured. "You have no pressing business in Matlock, do you?"

"No. But we were to travel north by the end of this week."

"Surely we might stay a while longer, Victor," said Clerval. "Your research can wait for you in Scotland."

Frankenstein struggled with his answer. "I don't think we should prevail on these good people any more."

"Nonsense," said Darcy. "We are fortunate for your company."

"Thank you," Frankenstein said uncertainly. But when the conversation moved elsewhere, Mary noticed him once again staring out the window. She moved to sit beside him. On an impulse, she said to him, *sotto voce*, "Did you know this man we came upon in the woods?"

"I saw no one. Even if someone was there, how should I know some English vagabond?"

"I do not think he was English. When he called after us, it was in German. Was this one of your countrymen?"

A look of impatience crossed Frankenstein's face, and he lowered his eyes. "Miss Bennet, I do not wish to contradict you, but you are mistaken. I saw no one in the woods."

Kitty developed a fever, and did not leave her bed for the rest of the

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day. Mary sat with her, trying, without bringing up the subject of Robert Piggot, to quiet her.

It was still raining when Mary retired, to a separate bedroom from the one she normally shared with Kitty. Late that night, Mary was wakened by the opening of her bedroom door. She thought it might be Lizzy to tell her something about Kitty. But it was not Lizzy.

Rather than call out, she watched silently as a dark figure entered and closed the door behind. The remains of her fire threw faint light on the man as he approached her. "Miss Bennet," he called softly.

Her heart was in her throat. "Yes, Mr. Frankenstein."

"Please do not take alarm. I must speak with you." He took two sudden steps toward her bed. His handsome face was agitated. No man, in any circumstances remotely resembling these, had ever broached her bedside. Yet the racing of her heart was not entirely a matter of fear.

"This, sir, is hardly the place for polite conversation," she said. "Following on your denial of what I saw this afternoon, you are fortunate that I do not wake the servants and have you thrown out of Pemberley."

"You are right to chide me. My conscience chides me more than you ever could, and should I be thrown from your family's gracious company it would be no less than I deserve. And I am afraid that nothing I have to say to you tonight shall qualify as polite conversation." His manner was greatly changed; there was a sound of desperation in his whisper. He wanted something from her, and he wanted it a great deal.

Curious, despite herself, Mary drew on her robe and lit a candle. She made him sit in one of the chairs by the fire and poked the coals into life. When she had settled herself in the other, she said, "Go on."

"Miss Bennet, please do not toy with me. You know why I am here."

"Know, sir? What do I know?"

He leaned forward, earnestly, hands clasped and elbows on his knees. "I come to beg you to keep silent. The gravest consequences would follow your revealing my secret."

"Silent?"

"About — about the man you saw."

"You *do* know him!"

"Your mockery at dinner convinced me that, after hearing the vicar's

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story, you suspected. Raising the dead, you said to Clerval — and then your tale of Professor Aldini. Do not deny it."

"I don't pretend to know what you are talking about."

Frankenstein stood from his chair and began to pace the floor before the hearth. "Please! I saw the look of reproach in your eyes when we found you in the forest. I am trying to make right what I put wrong. But I will never be able to do so if you tell." To Mary's astonishment, she saw, in the firelight, that his eyes glistened with tears.

"Tell me what you did."

And with that the story burst out of him. He told her how, after his mother's death, he longed to conquer death itself, how he had studied chemistry at the university, how he had uncovered the secret of life. How, emboldened and driven on by his solitary obsession, he had created a man from the corpses he had stolen from graveyards and purchased from resurrection men. How he had succeeded, through his science, in bestowing it with life.

Mary did not know what to say to this astonishing tale. It was the raving of a lunatic — but there was the man she had seen in the woods. And the earnestness with which Frankenstein spoke, his tears and desperate whispers, gave every proof that, at least in his mind, he had done these things. He told of his revulsion at his accomplishment, how he had abandoned the creature, hoping it would die, and how the creature had, in revenge, killed his brother William and caused his family's ward Justine to be blamed for the crime.

"But why did you not intervene in Justine's trial?"

"No one should have believed me."

"Yet I am to believe you now?"

Frankenstein's voice was choked. "You have seen the brute. You know that these things are possible. Lives are at stake. I come to you in remorse and penitence, asking only that you keep this secret." He fell to his knees, threw his head into her lap, and clutched at the sides of her gown.

Frankenstein was wholly mistaken in what she knew; he was a man who did not see things clearly. Yet if his story were true, it was no wonder that his judgment was disordered. And here he lay, trembling against her, a boy seeking forgiveness. No man had ever come to her in such need.

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She tried to keep her senses. "Certainly the creature I saw was frightening, but to my eyes he appeared more wretched than menacing."

Frankenstein lifted his head. "Here I must warn you — his wretchedness is mere mask. Do not let your sympathy for him cause you ever to trust his nature. He is the vilest creature that has ever walked this earth. He has no soul."

"Why then not invoke the authorities, catch him, and bring him to justice?"

"He cannot be so easily caught. He is inhumanly strong, resourceful, and intelligent. If you should ever be so unlucky as to speak with him, I warn you not to listen to what he says, for he is immensely articulate and satanically persuasive."

"All the more reason to see him apprehended!"

"I am convinced that he can be dealt with only by myself." Frankenstein's eyes pleaded with her. "Miss Bennet — Mary — you must understand. He is in some ways my son. I gave him life. His mind is fixed on me."

"And, it seems, yours on him."

Frankenstein looked surprised. "Do you wonder that is so?"

"Why does he follow you? Does he intend you harm?"

"He has vowed to glut the maw of death with my remaining loved ones, unless I make him happy." He rested his head again in her lap.

Mary was touched, scandalized, and in some obscure way aroused. She felt his trembling body, instinct with life. Tentatively, she rested her hand on his head. She stroked his hair. He was weeping. She realized that he was a physical being, a living animal, that would eventually, too soon, die. And all that was true of him was true of herself. How strange, frightening, and sad. Yet in this moment she felt herself wonderfully alive.

"I'll keep your secret," she said.

He hugged her skirts. In the candle's light, she noted the way his thick, dark hair curled away from his brow.

"I cannot tell you," he said softly, "what a relief it is to share my burden with another soul, and to have her accept me. I have been so completely alone. I cannot thank you enough."

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He rose, kissed her forehead, and was gone.

Mary paced her room, trying to grasp what had just happened. A man who had conquered death? A monster created from corpses? Such things did not happen, certainly not in her world, not even in the world of the novels she read. She climbed into bed and tried to sleep, but could not. The creature had vowed to kill all whom Frankenstein loved. Mary remembered the weight of his head upon her lap.

The room felt stiflingly hot. She got up, stripped off her nightgown, and climbed back between the sheets, where she lay naked, listening to the rain on the window.

KITTY'S FEVER WORSENED in the night, and before dawn Darcy sent to Lambton for the doctor. Lizzy dispatched an urgent letter to Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, and the sisters sat by Kitty's bedside through the morning, changing cold compresses from her brow while Kitty labored to breathe.

When Mary left the sick room, Frankenstein approached her. His desperation of the previous night was gone. "How fares your sister?"

"I fear she is gravely ill."

"She is in some danger?"

Mary could only nod.

He touched her shoulder, lowered his voice. "I will pray for her, Miss Bennet. I cannot thank you enough for the sympathy you showed me last night. I have never told anyone — "

Just then Clerval approached them. He greeted Mary, inquired after Kitty's condition, then suggested to Frankenstein that they return to their hotel in Matlock rather than add any burden to the household and family. Frankenstein agreed. Before Mary could say another word to him in private, the visitors were gone.

Doctor Phillips arrived soon after Clerval and Frankenstein left. He measured Kitty's pulse, felt her forehead, examined her urine. He administered some medicines, and came away shaking his head. Should the fever continue, he said, they must bleed her.

Given how much thought she had spent on Frankenstein through the night, and how little she had devoted to Kitty, Mary's conscience tormented her. She spent the day in her sister's room. That night, after Jane

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had retired and Lizzy fallen asleep in her chair, she still sat up, holding Kitty's fevered hand. She had matters to consider. Was Kitty indeed with child, and if so, should she tell the doctor? Yet even as she sat by Kitty's bedside, Mary's mind cast back to the feeling of Frankenstein's lips on her forehead.

In the middle of the night, Kitty woke, bringing Mary from her doze. Kitty tried to lift her head from the pillow, but could not. "Mary," she whispered. "You must send for Robert. We must be married immediately."

Mary looked across the room at Lizzy. She was still asleep.

"Promise me," Kitty said. Her eyes were large and dark.

"I promise," Mary said.

"Prepare my wedding dress," Kitty said. "But don't tell Lizzy."

Lizzy awoke then. She came to the bedside and felt Kitty's forehead. "She's burning up. Get Dr. Phillips."

Mary sought out the doctor, and then, while he went to Kitty's room, pondered what to do. Kitty clearly was not in her right mind. Her request ran contrary to both sense and propriety. If Mary sent one of the footment to Matlock for Robert, even if she swore her messenger to silence, the matter would soon be the talk of the servants, and probably the town.

It was the sort of dilemma that Mary would have had no trouble settling, to everyone's moral edification, when she was sixteen. She hurried to her room and took out paper and pen:

I write to inform you that one you love, residing at Pemberley House, is gravely ill. She urgently requests your presence. Simple human kindness, which from her description of you I do not doubt you possess, let alone the duty incumbent upon you owing to the compact that you have made with her through your actions, assure me that we shall see you here before the night is through.

Miss Mary Bennet

She sealed the letter and sought out one of the footmen, whom she dispatched immediately with the instruction to put the letter into the hand of Robert Piggot, son of the Matlock butcher.

Dr. Phillips bled Kitty, with no improvement. She did not regain

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consciousness through the night. Mary waited. The footman returned, alone, at six in the morning. He assured Mary that he had ridden to the Piggot home and given the letter directly to Robert. Mary thanked him.

Robert did not come. At eight in the morning Darcy sent for the priest. At nine-thirty Kitty died.

N THE EVENING of the day of Kitty's passing, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet arrived, and a day later Lydia and Wickham — it was the first time Darcy had allowed Wickham to cross the threshold of Pemberley since they had become brothers by marriage. In the midst of her mourning family, Mary felt lost. Jane and Lizzy supported each other in their grief. Darcy and Bingley exchanged quiet, sober conversation. Wickham and Lydia, who had grown fat with her three children, could not pass a word between them without sniping, but in their folly they were completely united.

Mrs. Bennet was beyond consoling, and the volume and intensity of her mourning was exceeded only by the degree to which she sought to control every detail of Kitty's funeral. There ensued a long debate over where Kitty should be buried. When it was pointed out that their cousin Mr. Collins would eventually inherit the house back in Hertfordshire, Mrs. Bennet fell into despair: who, when she was gone, would tend to her poor Kitty's grave? Mr. Bennet suggested that Kitty be laid to rest in the churchyard at Lambton, a short distance from Pemberley, where she might also be visited by Jane and Bingley. But when Mr. Darcy offered the family vault at Pemberley, the matter was quickly settled to the satisfaction of both tender hearts and vanity.

Though it was no surprise to Mary, it was still a burden for her to witness that even in the gravest passage of their lives, her sisters and parents showed themselves to be exactly what they were. And yet, paradoxically, this did not harden her heart toward them. The family was together as they had not been for many years, and she realized that they should never be in the future except on the occasion of further losses. Her father was grayer and quieter than she had ever seen him, and on the day of the funeral even her mother put aside her sobbing and exclamations long enough to show a face of profound grief, and a burden of age that Mary had never before noticed.

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The night after Kitty was laid to rest, Mary sat up late with Jane and Lizzy and Lydia. They drank Madeira and Lydia told many silly stories of the days she and Kitty had spent in flirtations with the regiment. Mary climbed into her bed late that night, her head swimming with wine, laughter, and tears. She lay awake, the moonlight shining on the counterpane through the opened window, air carrying the smell of fresh earth and the rustle of trees above the lake. She drifted into a dreamless sleep. At some point in the night she was half awakened by the barking of the dogs in the kennel. But consciousness soon faded and she fell away.

In the morning it was discovered that the vault had been broken into and Kitty's body stolen from her grave.

MARY TOLD the stablemaster that Mrs. Bennet had asked her to go to the apothecary in Lambton, and had him prepare the gig for her. Then, while the house was in turmoil and Mrs. Bennet being attended by the rest of the family, she drove off to Matlock. The master had given her the best horse in Darcy's stable; the creature was equable and quick, and despite her inexperience driving, Mary was able to reach Matlock in an hour. All the time, despite the splendid summer morning and the picturesque prospects which the valley of the Derwent continually unfolded before her, she could not keep her mind from whirling through a series of distressing images — among them the sight of Frankenstein's creature as she had seen him in the woods.

When she reached Matlock she hurried to the Old Bath Hotel and inquired after Frankenstein. The concierge told her that he had not seen Mr. Frankenstein since dinner the previous evening, but that Mr. Clerval had told him that morning that the gentlemen would leave Matlock later that day. She left a note asking Frankenstein, should he return, to meet her at the inn, then went to the butcher shop.

Mary had been there once before, with Lizzy, some years earlier. The shop was busy with servants purchasing joints of mutton and ham for the evening meal. Behind the counter Mr. Piggot senior was busy at his cutting board, but helping one of the women with a package was a tall young man with thick brown curls and green eyes. He flirted with the

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house servant as he shouldered her purchase, wrapped in brown paper, onto her cart.

On the way back into the shop, he spotted Mary standing unattended. He studied her for a moment before approaching. "May I help you, miss?"

"I believe you knew my sister."

His grin vanished. "You are Miss Mary Bennet."

"I am."

The young man studied his boots. "I am so sorry what happened to Miss Catherine."

Not so sorry as to bring you to her bedside before she died, Mary thought. She bit back a reproach and said, "We did not see you at the service. I thought perhaps the nature of your relationship might have encouraged you to grieve in private, at her graveside. Have you been there?"

He looked even more uncomfortable. "No. I had to work. My father — "

Mary had seen enough already to measure his depth. He was not a man to defile a grave, in grief or otherwise. The distance between this small-town lothario — handsome, careless, insensitive — and the hero Kitty had praised, only deepened Mary's compassion for her lost sister. How desperate she must have been. How pathetic.

As Robert Piggot continued to stumble through his explanation, Mary turned and departed.

She went back to the inn where she had left the gig. The barkeep led her into a small ladies' parlor separated from the tap room by a glass partition. She ordered tea, and through a latticed window watched the people come and go in the street and courtyard, the draymen with their Percherons and carts, the passengers waiting for the next van to Manchester, and inside, the idlers sitting at tables with pints of ale. In the sunlit street a young bootblack accosted travelers, most of whom ignored him. All of these people alive, completely unaware of Mary or her lost sister. Mary ought to be back with their mother, though the thought turned her heart cold. How could Kitty have left her alone? She felt herself near despair.

She was watching through the window as two draymen struggled to load a large square trunk onto their cart when the man directing them

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came from around the team of horses, and she saw it was Frankenstein. She rose immediately and went out into the inn yard. She was at his shoulder before he noticed her. "Miss Bennet!"

"Mr. Frankenstein. I am so glad that I found you. I feared that you had already left Matlock. May we speak somewhere in private?"

He looked momentarily discommoded. "Yes, of course," he said. To the draymen he said. "When you've finished loading my equipment, wait here."

"This is not a good place to converse," Frankenstein told her. "I saw a churchyard nearby. Let us retire there."

He walked Mary down the street to the St. Giles Churchyard. They walked through the rectory garden. In the distance, beams of afternoon sunlight shone through a cathedral of clouds above the Heights of Abraham. "Do you know what has happened?" she asked.

"I have heard reports, quite awful, of the death of your sister. I intended to write you, conveying my condolences, at my earliest opportunity. You have my deepest sympathies."

"Your creature! That monster you created — "

"I asked you to keep him a secret."

"I have kept my promise — so far. But it has stolen Kitty's body."

He stood there, hands behind his back, clear eyes fixed on her. "You find me astonished. What draws you to this extraordinary conclusion?"

She was hurt by his diffidence. Was this the same man who had wept in her bedroom? "Who else might do such a thing?"

"But why? This creature's enmity is reserved for me alone. Others feel its ire only to the extent that they are dear to me."

"You came to plead with me that night because you feared I knew he was responsible for defiling that town girl's grave. Why was he watching Kitty and me in the forest? Surely this is no coincidence."

"If, indeed, the creature has stolen your sister's body, it can be for no reason I can fathom, or that any god-fearing person ought to pursue. You know I am determined to see this monster banished from the world of men. You may rest assured that I will not cease until I have seen this accomplished. It is best for you and your family to turn your thoughts to other matters." He touched a strand of ivy growing up the side of the

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garden wall, and plucked off a green leaf, which he twirled in his fingers.

She could not understand him. She knew him to be a man of sensibility, to have a heart capable of feeling. His denials opened a possibility that she had tried to keep herself from considering. "Sir, I am not satisfied. It seems to me that you are keeping something from me. You told me of the great grief you felt at the loss of your mother, how it moved you to your researches. If, as you say, you have uncovered the secret of life, might you — have you taken it upon yourself to restore Kitty? Perhaps a fear of failure, or of the horror that many would feel at your trespassing against God's will, underlies your secrecy. If so, please do not keep the truth from me. I am not a girl."

He let the leaf fall from his fingers. He took her shoulders, and looked directly into her eyes. "I am sorry, Mary. To restore your sister is not in my power. The soulless creature I brought to life bears no relation to the man from whose body I fashioned him. Your sister has gone on to her reward. Nothing — nothing I can do would bring her back."

"So you know nothing about the theft of her corpse?"

"On that score, I can offer no consolation to you or your family."

"My mother, my father — they are inconsolable."

"Then they must content themselves with memories of your sister as she lived. As I must do with my dear, lost brother William, and the traduced and dishonored Justine. Come, let us go back to the inn."

Mary burst into tears. He held her to him and she wept on his breast. Eventually she gathered herself and allowed him to take her arm, and they slowly walked back down to the main street of Matlock and the inn. She knew that when they reached it, Frankenstein would go. The warmth of his hand on hers almost made her beg him to stay, or better still, to take her with him.

They came to the busy courtyard. The dray stood off to the side, and Mary saw the cartmen were in the taproom. Frankenstein, agitated, upbraided them. "I thought I told you to keep those trunks out of the sun."

The older of the two men put down his pint and stood. "Sorry, Gov'nor. We'll see to it directly."

"Do so now."

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As Frankenstein spoke, the evening coach drew up before the inn and prepared for departure. "You and Mr. Clerval leave today?" Mary asked.

"Yes. As soon as Henry arrives from the Old Bath, we take the coach to the Lake District. And thence to Scotland."

"They say it is very beautiful there."

"I am afraid that its beauty will be lost on me. I carry the burden of my great crime, not to be laid down until I have made things right."

She felt that she would burst if she did not speak her heart to him. "Victor. Will I ever see you again?"

He avoided her gaze. "I am afraid, Miss Bennet, that this is unlikely. My mind is set on banishing that vile creature from the world of men. Only then can I hope to return home and marry my betrothed Elizabeth."

Mary looked away from him. A young mother was adjusting her son's collar before putting him on the coach. "Ah, yes. You are affianced. I had almost forgotten."

Frankenstein pressed her hand. "Miss Bennet, you must forgive me the liberties I have taken with you. You have given me more of friendship than I deserve. I wish you to find the companion you seek, and to live your days in happiness. But now, I must go."

"God be with you, Mr. Frankenstein." She twisted her gloved fingers into a knot.

He bowed deeply, and hurried to have a few more words with the draymen. Henry Clerval arrived just as the men climbed to their cart and drove the baggage away. Clerval, surprised at seeing Mary, greeted her warmly. He expressed his great sorrow at the loss of her sister, and begged her to convey his condolences to the rest of her family. Ten minutes later the two men climbed aboard the coach and it left the inn, disappearing down the Matlock high street.

Mary stood in the inn yard. She did not feel she could bear to go back to Pemberley and face her family, the histrionics of her mother. Instead she reentered the inn and made the barkeep seat her in the ladies' parlor and bring her a bottle of port.

The sun declined and shadows stretched over the inn yard. The evening papers arrived from Nottingham. The yard boy lit the lamps. Still, Mary would not leave. Outside on the pavements, the boot-black sat in the

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growing darkness with his arms draped over his knees and head on his breast. She listened to the hoofs of the occasional horse striking the cobbles. The innkeeper was solicitous. When she asked for a second bottle, he hesitated, and wondered if he might send for someone from her family to take her home.

"You do not know my family," she said.

"Yes, miss. I only thought — "

"Another port. Then leave me alone."

"Yes, miss." He went away.

She was determined to become intoxicated. How many times had she piously warned against young women behaving as she did now? *Virtue is her own reward.* She had an apothegm for every occasion, and had tediously produced them in place of thought. *Show me a liar, and I'll show thee a thief. Marry in haste, repent at leisure. Men should be what they seem.*

She did not fool herself into thinking that her current misbehavior would make any difference. Perhaps Bingley or Darcy had been dispatched to find her in Lambton. But within an hour or two she would return to Pemberley, where her mother would scold her for giving them an anxious evening, and Lizzy would caution her about the risk to her reputation. Lydia might even ask her, not believing it possible, if she had an assignation with some man. The loss of Kitty would overshadow Mary's indiscretion, pitiful as it had been. Soon all would be as it had been, except Mary would be alive and Kitty dead. But even that would fade. The shadow of Kitty's death would hang over the family for some time, but she doubted that anything of significance would change.

As she lingered over her glass, she looked up and noticed, in the now empty taproom, a man sitting at the table farthest from the lamps. A huge man, wearing rough clothes, his face hooded and in shadow. On the table in front of him was a tankard of ale and a few coppers. Mary rose, left the parlor for the taproom, and crossed toward him.

He looked up, and the faint light from the ceiling lamp caught his black eyes, sunken beneath heavy brows. He was hideously ugly. "May I sit with you?" she asked. She felt slightly dizzy.

"You may sit where you wish." The voice was deep, but swallowed, unable to project. It was almost a whisper.

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Trembling only slightly, she sat. His wrists and hands, resting on the table, stuck out past the ragged sleeves of his coat. His skin was yellowish brown, and the fingernails livid white. He did not move. "You have some business with me?"

"I have the most appalling business." Mary tried to look him in the eyes, but her gaze kept slipping. "I want to know why you defiled my sister's grave, why you have stolen her body, and what you have done with her."

"Better you should ask Victor. Did he not explain all to you?"

"Mr. Frankenstein explained who — what — you are. He did not know what had become of my sister."

The thin lips twitched in a sardonic smile. "Poor Victor. He has got things all topsy-turvy. Victor does not know what I am. He is incapable of knowing, no matter the labors I have undertaken to school him. But he does know what became, and is to become, of your sister." The creature tucked the thick black hair behind his ear, a sudden unconscious gesture that made him seem completely human for the first time. He pulled the hood further forward to hide his face.

"So tell me."

"Which answer do you want? Who I am, or what happened to your sister?"

"First, tell me what happened to — to Kitty."

"Victor broke into the vault and stole her away. He took the utmost care not to damage her. He washed her fair body in diluted carbolic acid, and replaced her blood with a chemical admixture of his own devising. Folded up, she fit neatly within a cedar trunk sealed with pitch, and is at present being shipped to Scotland. You witnessed her departure from this courtyard an hour ago."

Mary's senses rebelled. She covered her face with her hands. The creature sat silent. Finally, without raising her head, she managed, "Victor warned me that you were a liar. Why should I believe you?"

"You have no reason to believe me."

"*You* took her!"

"Though I would not have scrupled to do so, I did not. Miss Bennet, I do not deny I have an interest in this matter. Victor did as I have told you at my bidding."

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"At your bidding? Why?"

"Kitty — or not so much Kitty, as her remains — is to become my wife."

"Your wife! This is insupportable! Monstrous!"

"Monstrous." Suddenly, with preternatural quickness, his hand flashed out and grabbed Mary's wrist.

Mary thought to call for help, but the bar was empty and she had driven the innkeeper away. Yet his grip was not harsh. His hand was warm, instinct with life. "Look at me," he said. With his other hand he pushed back his hood.

She took a deep breath. She looked.

His noble forehead, high cheekbones, strong chin, and wide set eyes might have made him handsome, despite the scars and dry yellow skin, were it not for his expression. His ugliness was not a matter of lack of proportion — or rather, the lack of proportion was not in his features. Like his swallowed voice, his face was submerged, as if everything was hidden, revealed only in the eyes, the twitch of a cheek or lip. Every minute motion showed extraordinary animation. Hectic sickliness, but energy. This was a creature who had never learned to associate with civilized company, who had been thrust into adulthood with the passions of a wounded boy. Fear, self-disgust, anger. Desire.

The force of longing and rage in that face made her shrink. "Let me go," she whispered.

He let go her wrist. With bitter satisfaction, he said, "You see. If what I demand is insupportable, that is only because your kind has done nothing to support me. Once, I falsely hoped to meet with beings, who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of bringing forth. Now I am completely alone. More than any starving man on a deserted isle, I am cast away. I have no brother, sister, parents. I have only Victor who, like so many fathers, recoiled from me the moment I first drew breath. And so, I have commanded him to make of your sister my wife, or he and all he loves will die at my hand."

"No. I cannot believe he would commit this abomination."

"He has no choice. He is my slave."

"His conscience could not support it, even at the cost of his life."

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"You give him too much credit. You all do. He does not think. I have not seen him act other than according to impulse for the last three years. That is all I see in any of you."

Mary drew back, trying to make some sense of this horror. Her sister, to be brought to life, only to be given to this fiend. But would it be her sister, or another agitated, hungry thing like this?

She still retained some scraps of skepticism. The creature's manner did not bespeak the isolation which he claimed. "I am astonished at your grasp of language," Mary said. "You could not know so much without teachers."

"Oh, I have had many teachers." The creature's mutter was rueful. "You might say that, since first my eyes opened, mankind has been all my study. I have much yet to learn. There are certain words whose meaning has never been proved to me by experience. For example: *Happy.* Victor is to make me happy. Do you think he can do it?"

Mary thought of Frankenstein. Could he satisfy this creature? "I do not think it is in the power of any other person to make one happy."

"You jest with me. Every creature has its mate, save me. I have none."

She recoiled at his self-pity. Her fear faded. "You put too much upon having a mate."

"Why? You know nothing of what I have endured."

"You think that having a female of your own kind will insure that she will accept you?" Mary laughed. "Wait until you are rejected, for the most trivial of reasons, by one you are sure has been made for you."

A shadow crossed the creature's face. "That will not happen."

"It happens more often than not."

"The female that Victor creates shall find no other mate than me."

"That has never prevented rejection. Or if you should be accepted, then you may truly begin to learn."

"Learn what?"

"You will learn to ask a new question: Which is worse, to be alone, or to be wretchedly mismatched?" Like Lydia and Wickham, Mary thought. Like Collins and his poor wife Charlotte. Like her parents.

The creature's face spasmed with conflicting emotions. His voice gained volume. "Do not sport with me. I am not your toy."

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"No. You only seek a toy of your own."

The creature was not, apparently, accustomed to mockery. "You must not say these things!" He lurched upward, awkwardly, so suddenly that he upended the table. The tankard of beer skidded across the top and spilled on Mary, and she fell back.

At that moment the innkeeper entered the bar room with two other men. They saw the tableau and rushed forward. "Here! Let her be!" he shouted. One of the other men grabbed the creature by the arm. With a roar the creature flung him aside like an old coat. His hood fell back. The men stared in horror at his face. The creature's eyes met Mary's, and with inhuman speed he whirled and ran out the door.

The men gathered themselves together. The one whom the creature had thrown aside had a broken arm. The innkeeper helped Mary to her feet. "Are you all right, miss?"

Mary felt dizzy. Was she all right? What did that mean?

"I believe so," she said.

WHEN MARY RETURNED to Pemberley, late that night, she found the house in an uproar over her absence. Bingley and Darcy both had been to Lambton, and had searched the road and the woods along it throughout the afternoon and evening. Mrs. Bennet had taken to bed with the conviction that she had lost two daughters in a single week. Wickham condemned Mary's poor judgment, Lydia sprang to Mary's defense, and this soon became a row over Wickham's lack of an income and Lydia's mismanagement of their children. Mr. Bennett closed himself up in the library.

Mary told them only that she had been to Matlock. She offered no explanation, no apology. Around the town the story of her conflict with the strange giant in the inn was spoken of for some time, along with rumors of Robert Piggot the butcher's son, and the mystery of Kitty's defiled grave — but as Mary was not a local, and nothing of consequence followed, the talk soon passed away.

That winter, Mary came upon the following story in the Nottingham newspaper.

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Ghastly Events in Scotland

Our northern correspondent files the following report. In early November, the body of a young foreigner, Mr. Henry Clerval of Geneva, Switzerland, was found upon the beach near the far northern town of Thurso. The body, still warm, bore marks of strangulation. A second foreigner, Mr. Victor Frankstone, was taken into custody, charged with the murder, and held for two months. Upon investigation, the magistrate Mr. Kirwan determined that Mr. Frankstone was in the Orkney Islands at the time of the killing. The accused was released in the custody of his father, and is assumed to have returned to his home on the continent.

A month after the disposition of these matters, a basket, weighted with stones and containing the body of a young woman, washed up in the estuary of the River Thurso. The identity of the woman is unknown, and her murderer undiscovered, but it is speculated that the unfortunate may have died at the hands of the same person or persons who murdered Mr. Clerval. The woman was given Christian burial in the Thurso Presbyterian churchyard.

The village has been shaken by these events, and prays God to deliver it from evil.

Oh, Victor, Mary thought. She remembered the pressure of his hand, through her dressing gown, upon her thigh. Now he had returned to Switzerland, there, presumably, to marry his Elizabeth. She hoped that he would be more honest with his wife than he had been with her, but the fate of Clerval did not bode well. And the creature still had no mate.

She clipped the newspaper report and slipped it into the drawer of her writing table, where she kept her copy of Samuel Galton's *The Natural History of Birds, Intended for the Amusement and Instruction of Children*, and the *Juvenile Anecdotes* of Priscilla Wakefield, and a Dudley locust made of stone, and a paper fan from the first ball she had ever

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attended, and a dried wreath of flowers that had been thrown to her, when she was nine years old, from the top of a tree by one of the town boys playing near Meryton common.

After the death of her parents, Mary lived with Lizzy and Darcy at Pemberley for the remainder of her days. Under a pen name, she pursued a career as a writer of philosophical speculations, and sent many letters to the London newspapers. Aunt Mary, as she was called at home, was known for her kindness to William, and to his wife and children. The children teased Mary for her nearsightedness, her books, and her piano. But for a woman whose experience of the world was so slender, and whose soul it seemed had never been touched by any passion, she came at last to be respected for her understanding, her self possession, and her wise counsel on matters of the heart.

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

The Publishing House Always Wins

"*Maxim*, the raucous men's magazine, has never been shy about putting its name out there. But nothing compares to its latest brand extension, which will affix the *Maxim* name to a new hotel and casino on the Las Vegas Strip."

—"Lad Mag and a Brand in Las Vegas," by Lorne Manly, *The New York Times*, June 5, 2006.

I WAS IN a truly crappy mood that night. I had been demoted to the ranks of the third-tier showgirls in the "Hotties of Zenna Henderson's *The People* Revue" just because I had shown up for rehearsal drunk three times in a row. And a pay cut just added to the sting. But even though I was so far back on the big stage that the rubes in the audience could barely make out my pasties, I still had to force an unending cheek-stretching smile. The thong of my spacesuit costume was riding up my butt and my feet hurt in my battered Capezios. But I kept up with the other girls anyhow, kicking and prancing to beat the band.

The last thing I wanted was to lose my job here at the *F&SF* Casino. Vegas was a cruel town, crueler than ever since the New York publishers had moved in, and I knew that if I blew off this position, after all my other notorious failures in this incestuous town, I could easily start falling and never stop.

The song-and-dance number seemed to stretch on forever. Some washed-up pop tart at the front of the stage, dressed like an Amish schoolgirl — if Amish schoolgirls wore fishnets and bustiers — was singing about Earth boys being major studs, and every sour note she shrieked made me wince. But finally all us dancers made our exit offstage and back to the dressing room in a fog of female sweat and perfume.

But even then I wasn't free for

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the night. I started changing into the house's standard cocktail waitress uniform. It was modeled along the lines of what some babe wore in a book called *Glory Road*.

Jeanie, who was the closest thing to a friend I had among the troupe, said, "What's with the queen of the cosmos getup, Ava?"

"Aw, I took on a shift hustling drinks. Gotta make up the money I lost somehow."

"Could be worse. Maybe you'll get to meet some generous high-rollers."

"Hunh! Not likely. This joint is strictly penny ante. Now if I was working at *The New Yorker* or the *Atlantic Monthly* or even *Granta*, then maybe I'd be brushing shoulders with some major players...."

Jeanie finished taking off her stage makeup. "Well, you never know who's gonna show up at an offbeat joint like this. I heard somebody spotted Joyce Carol Oates on the floor last weekend. She dropped ten large at the craps table."

Adjusting the fit of my strapless bra, I thought about Jeanie's comments, and felt a little better. You never could tell who you'd meet in this life. Maybe tonight would bring me luck.

Little did I know then how right I was.

I exited the dressing room and made my way past the noisy flashing slot machines with their motifs from a bunch of weird stories I had never heard of before coming to work here. "A Canticle for Leibowitz." "Hothouse." "That Hellbound Train." (Now that one was really appropriate to this place and my mood.) "A Rose for Ecclesiastes." (They must've been aiming for the Bible Belt crowd with that one.) "The Deathbird." (Another cheerful motif.) And so on and so on, with all the slot zombies shoving bills into the machines and pushing buttons like they were earning overtime at some misery factory, their faces lit up in Technicolor by the glowing screens like that astronaut's helmet in *2001*.

I made my way across the broad busy floor to the Boucher Room bar, picked up a tray with a few of the more popular miscellaneous mixed drinks already on it, and began to circulate. I got the nod from various security guys I was friendly with. They were all dressed up like "Starship Troopers" and "Time Patrol" officers, so there was no secret about who they were. But this was the kind of rough and tumble house where discretion was less important than a visible show of force.

The next couple of hours,

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nothing out of the ordinary happened. I decided to visit the poker tables in the McComas Room.

I zeroed in right away on one particular game.

A big Texan sat behind an enormous pile of chips. He looked like something out of a Fritz Leiber story, tall and thin. (Okay, I been doing a little outside reading since I took this job. The stuff's kinda addictive.) He was sweating and grinning, smoking a big stogie. When he spotted me he bellowed out, "Howdy, little miss! Let's have another one of those 'Flowers for Algernons' over here, pronto!"

Luckily I had one of the tall frosty drinks on my tray. I set it down on the table in front of him and recited the drink's motto: "Every sip makes you smarter!"

He extinguished his cigar in an old glass, winked at me, then swilled a big draft of his new drink. "Sure thing — until you crash!"

Turning again to his fellow players, Tex said, "Okay, boys, let's get back to building up Daddy's retirement fund. This hand's gonna be 'Rogue Moon,' with the multiple sudden death option."

Everyone groaned, but resigned themselves to the Texan's choice as their only chance to win any of their money back.

For the next three hours I kept close to Tex, stoking him with drinks and letting him grope my butt. The way he was raking it in, I was counting on at least a thousand for a tip, maybe more. That would go a long way toward improving my finances.

But the longer he played and the more he drank without getting dumb as a lab rat, the more suspicious I got. There was just something plain unnatural about this guy.

Then it hit me, and without meaning to, I blurted it right out.

"Hey, this guy's Ferdinand Feghoot!"

Instantly a pile of security guys were on top of us, immobilizing Tex before he could escape. Acknowledging he was trapped, the guy shimmered, changing his very looks. In place of the tall skinny Texan was a burly, black-haired guy with plastic-frame glasses and plenty of chin spinach: the most common appearance of Ferdinand Feghoot, aka Randall Garrett, Mark Phillips, Robert Randall, and a dozen other crooked bylines, a notorious cardsharp with access to various unnatural powers and knowledge of the future, banned from every casino on the Strip.

Feghoot gave me a wry smile

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and said, "Well spotted, little miss. But you've just blown a very sizable tip."

The Starship Troopers hustled the con man away and I collapsed into his seat and began to cry.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was one of the Time Patrol.

"Miss Davidson, the Owner would like to see you in his offices."

I managed to pull myself together somehow, and followed the Time Patrolman.

The Owner's offices were a swank penthouse with a view of the whole damn sleazy city. I had never been in such luxurious digs. While I sipped a rum and Coke (the Time Patrolman had told me to take whatever I wanted from the private bar), I gawked at all the artwork on the walls: Freas, Emsh, Hunter, Walotsky.... Several portraits showed all the past Owners, right down to some guy named Ed Ferman. While I was admiring their happy faces, the current Owner walked in.

I had never seen his face before, not any pictures either, and I expected some freak like Howard Hughes. Instead, I got prime Russell Crowe!

Dressed in a tuxedo, his face charmingly stubbled, the Owner extended his hand, and I took it with a sweaty palm.

"Miss Davidson," he said in a voice that would melt ice on Pluto, "you've saved Spilogale Enterprises a considerable sum of money and much bad publicity tonight. I'd like to make it up to you somehow."

"Well, if you could set me up with a better job here — "

"Consider it done," he said, and the rest of the night is strictly off-limits to you.

So now I work in the Isaac Asimov Sweet Science Amphitheater, where all the big-money boxing matches go down. I'm a Ring Girl, carrying the information cards at the start of each match and between rounds. It's a lot easier on the old tootsies than hoofing it, pays twice as much, and the job has got me a new boyfriend too.

"Battlin'" Boff Hurkle, and he's got the body of a god!

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Ruth Nestvold lives in Germany and has a Ph.D. from the University of Stuttgart (but she asks not to be called Dr. Ruth). Since attending the Clarion West writer's workshop in 1998, she sold stories to Asimov's, Realms of Fantasy, Strange Horizons, *and about a dozen other anthologies and magazines. Her first novel,* Yseult, *has just been sold to a German publisher.*

Mars: A Traveler's Guide

By Ruth Nestvold

YOU HAVE CHOSEN THE topic "dust storms":

Dust storms on Mars can encompass the entire planet. Global winds disperse the dust until the entire surface is covered and sunlight is cut off. When sunlight can no longer warm the ground, the effect stops. These storms are connected with the dominant weather patterns and the warmer summers in the southern hemisphere —

You have chosen the topic "weather patterns":

Weather on Mars consists of storms made of dust rather than rain. Typically, these storms occur during summer in the southern hemisphere, which on average is warmer than the northern hemisphere because it comes appreciably closer to the sun as a result of the elliptical orbit of the planet. The rapid heating of the surface gives rise to the famous "dust devils": when the temperature difference between lower and higher altitude air is great enough, pockets of warm, rising air expand and turn into whirlwinds that pick up dust. These dust devils can trigger global storms. The dusty air absorbs sunlight, warming the upper atmosphere

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and changing wind patterns. The dust particles in the clouds trap infrared energy, helping to make the planet's atmosphere warmer.

Weather patterns are extremely difficult to forecast because the changes are dramatic and can result in abrupt planet-wide swings between dusty and hot and cloudy and cold —

I'm sorry, I have no entry in my database for "rover accident."

Would you like to select a new topic?

You have chosen the topic "pressurized rover":

The pressurized rover is especially designed to withstand the stresses of the Martian environment. The passenger compartment is protected by a waffled body tub in order to ensure that the cabin will not lose pressure in case the outer shell is damaged. Radiator fins help control the interior temperature. The rover has two independent hydrogen fuel cell systems, one on each side, and a power transmission grid wired directly into each wheel — a design very resistant to breakdowns —

You have chosen the topic "fuel cell":

The fuel cells in the rover are powered by hydrogen (H_2), working through a nanocontrolled catalytic membrane rated for Mars-normal surface conditions. These fuel cells can also provide power to pressure suits, exploration droids, and other Mars excursion implements. Hydrogen is available from a number of sources including subsurface ice deposits, trace amounts in the Martian atmosphere, and ice shipped on low-energy trajectories from Jovian orbit or salvaged from cometary bodies.

If you'd like me to repeat this entry, say 'repeat.' If you'd like to explore a new topic, simply say the name of the topic. If you're done using the Mars Traveler's Guide, *say 'quit' to shut the system down.*

Return to the topic "dust storms":

Some dust storms rise up to eight kilometers above the surface of the planet and may carry many tons of fine red dust. Heavy dustfalls can be dumped on areas below the datum plane or within areologically sheltered formations that otherwise experience little or no direct impact from the storm. Major dust storms can cause brownouts, leading to dramatically decreased visibility, which may be so bad that the horizon, landmarks, and nearby safe havens cannot be seen. If this should occur, travelers are advised to use GPS navigational assistance. Martian scientists, however,

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are rapidly developing the technology to predict dust storms, making it possible to take extra precautions in advance against the danger of dust particles.

If you'd like me to repeat this entry, say 'repeat.' If you'd like to explore a new topic, simply say the name of the topic —

You have chosen the topic "dust particles":

Dust is one of the biggest dangers to travelers on Mars. Dust devils with wind speeds of over one hundred fifty kilometers per hour can carry the particles into rover engines, bearings, machinery, air-locks, and pressure-suit fittings. Dust may travel at such high velocity that it can have an effect resembling sandblasting on equipment and viewports —

You have chosen the topic "GPS":

GPS is available extensively near the Mars bases and within the planet's equatorial zone thanks to line-of-sight repeaters. At this time, there are not enough satellites deployed for full-time planetwide coverage, but our experts at Red Planet Adventures project that within ten years, satellite coverage will reach one hundred percent.

Availability of navigation services and other kinds of satellite-based communications may be hampered by landforms with an altitude differential sufficient to obscure the satellite footprint or repeater sightlines. In the case of an emergency in which communication is not possible, your tour guide will direct you to the nearest Mars base as quickly as possible.

If you'd like me to repeat this entry, say 'repeat.' If you'd like —

You have chosen the topic "Mars bases":

The bases on Mars at present include Sagan in Kasei Vallis — the first and largest, and also headquarters of Red Planet Adventures — Gagarin in Hebes Chasma in the Valles Marineris system, Armstrong in the Gusev Crater, the most isolated of the Martian bases —

You have chosen the topic "Armstrong Base":

Neil Armstrong Memorial Base is situated north of Ma'adim Vallis in the Aesis region of Mars. The site in the Gusev Crater lies at the mouth of a very long fluvial valley dating from about 3.5 billion years ago. The area has provided some of the earliest evidence for ancient Martian microbes —

You have chosen the topic "Ma'adim Vallis":

Ma'adim Vallis is one of the largest canyons on Mars. Over seven

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hundred kilometers long, twenty kilometers wide, and two kilometers deep in some places, it offers breathtaking vistas to the Mars adventure tourist. The course of the valley runs from a region of southern lowlands thought to have once contained a large group of lakes north to Gusev Crater near the equator, the location of Armstrong Base. The tour from Armstrong the length of the valley of Ma'adim is one of the most dramatic offered by Red Planet Adventures —

Return to the topic "Armstrong Base":

While it does not yet provide the level of amenities available in Sagan or Arestia with their geodesic domes, Armstrong Base has its own picturesque charm for adventure tourists. Its networked habitat is reminiscent of the early days of Mars colonization and provides a feel for authentic history. But even here, tourists need have no fears regarding safety considerations. The individual pods in the habitat are constructed from titanium-reinforced buckyplastic, equipped with double air locks, and connected to each other with inflatable tunnels of neoKevlar. Spacesuits are provided for all visitors and included in the tour package. However, it is not recommended that tourists attempt to explore Gusev Crater or nearby Ma'adim Vallis without an experienced tour guide.

If you'd like —

You have chosen the topic "Safety Considerations":

Tours with Red Planet Adventures have been optimized for safety —

I'm sorry, did you say 'vacuum'?

I'm sorry, I don't understand the phrase, "no eye said fuck you."

Would you like to select a new topic?

You have chosen to return to the topic "Safety Considerations":

Despite the hostile environment of Mars, Red Planet Adventures has never had a fatality in the three years we have been offering our tours. While every effort has been made to ensure the safety of our guests, we would like to remind you to use extreme caution at all times while traveling the red planet. Mars dust is a major potential threat to both machinery and humans: dust devils have been known to disable computers and delicate electronics, interfere with radio communications and even damage pressurized human habitats. It is necessary to keep in mind that despite initial terraforming experiments, the atmosphere, the air temperature, and the barometric pressure are still such that Mars remains

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uninhabitable for humans outside of the habitats. Pressure suits should be worn in all situations where it is possible that the visitor might be subject to Martian elements —

You have chosen the topic "Pressure Suit":

The pressure suits provided for guests of Red Planet Adventures are state-of-the-art suit technology, employing mechanical counter-pressure (MCP) for the extremities of Martian exploration. The MCP suit system consists of a lightweight, elastic bio-suit layer, hard torso shell, portable life-support system, helmet, gloves, and boots. The life-support system attaches to the torso shell. The MCP suit exerts pressure on the body through the form-fitting bio-suit rather than by the breathing gas. The helmet, attached to the life-support system, provides pressurization to the head as well as oxygen for breathing. Tears in an MCP suit can cause symptoms of localized low pressure exposure at the site of the tear (such as bruising and edema), but the rest of the body remains protected: the elastic weave of the bio-suit prevents the tear from propagating.

The power cells running the suit's life-support system can be recharged using standard hydrogen fuel cells, such as those powering a pressurized rover, for a service life of up to twelve hours. Integrated into the suit is a communications module, biosensors, and the computer you are at present accessing —

You have chosen the topic "communications module":

The communications modules of the bio-suits provide a direct connection to the communications systems in the Mars bases via satellite coverage. This ensures that the traveler can easily contact the rover or the nearest base in case he or she gets lost —

You have chosen the topic "satellite coverage":

Red Planet Adventures does not conduct tours where satellite coverage is unavailable; however, signals may be hampered by land formations such as walls of craters or valles, or rough chasmal terrain, among others. Such areas which are frequently traveled will have GPS and comm repeaters mounted along the rim or higher altitudes at regular intervals. If spotty coverage still occurs, it may be the result of storm damage. In the case of an emergency situation, your tour guide —

I have no entry in my database for "tour guide dead."

Would you like to select a new topic?

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You have chosen the topic "Emergency":

In the case of an emergency situation, your tour guide —

I have no entry in my database for "fuck you."

Would you like to select a new topic?

You have chosen the topic "Emergency Situation":

A number of accidents qualify as emergency situations according to the Mars Emergency Rescue Statutes (MERS):

1) Damage to a habitat that would endanger pressurization or breathable oxygen levels.

2) Damage to an oxygen production plant.

3) Failure in a wind or solar energy plant.

4) Failure in the communications system —

You have chosen the topic "Failure in the Communications System":

In the case of a failure in the communications system, make your way to the nearest relay station or base as quickly as possible and notify the proper authorities of the failure. This transport-based database will provide you with all the information needed for MEA to localize the problem.

You have chosen the topic "Failure in Ground Transportation":

In the case of a failure in ground transportation, notify the proper authorities via satellite as quickly as possible.

You have chosen the topic "Failure in Multiple Systems":

In the case of a failure in multiple systems, a number of options are available, including the following:

1) Repair of the ground transportation.

2) Repair of the communications system.

3) Manual signaling to nearby bases or relay stations.

If none of these options is feasible, it may be necessary to navigate on foot to the nearest base or relay station. With an undamaged bio-suit and full oxygen reserves in the life-support system, an experienced Mars explorer can survive for several days in the open environment. It is, however, critical to maintain suit reserve power: the traveler should be careful not to stray too far from the rover's fuel cell capacity in order to ensure that batteries can be recharged —

You have chosen the topic "Fuel Cell Damage":

Damaged fuel cells can be replaced at all Martian bases. In the event

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that rover fuel cells are damaged to the extent that return to a base is not possible, notify Mars Emergency Authority immediately.

If you'd like —

You have chosen the topic "Notify Mars Emergency Authority":

In order to notify the Mars Emergency Authority (MEA), use either the communications module in your pressure suit or the communications system of the rover. Give your location, the unit number of your tour, and a precise description of the problem. A rescue team will be to your site within eight hours.

I have no entry in my database for "rescue my ass."

Would you like to select a new topic?

I'm sorry, the volume of your last request was too high for me to understand. Please repeat.

You have chosen the topic "help":

The Help System of the Mars Traveler's Guide is an extensive database covering a wide range of topics, both informational and practical. If you do not find the topic you need, contact user support and make a suggestion. We are always happy to receive feedback.

If you'd like me to repeat this entry, say 'repeat.' If you'd like to explore a new topic, simply say the name of the topic. If you're done using the Mars Traveler's Guide, say "quit" to shut the system down.

You have not made a selection for more than ten minutes. In order to access the database, select a topic on your wrist unit or voice a topic of your own. If there is no appropriate entry in the database, search for a similar word or term. If you are no longer in need of the help system, select or voice "quit."

Would you like to select a new topic?

The system has been idle for more than thirty minutes and will go into sleep mode. To reactivate the system, simply voice your request.

The system has been idle for more than sixty minutes. This system is shutting down.

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Although he has been publishing short fiction for more than forty years, James Powell's name might not be familiar to many of our readers. That's because the majority of his work is in the mystery genre — he has been a frequent contributor to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine *and a winner of the Arthur Ellis Award. Not surprisingly, his first* F&SF *story includes an investigation, but it is definitely a work of fantasy. Really. Honest. Trust us.*

The Quest for Creeping Charlie

By James Powell

IN THE EARLY 1950S, GEORGE Muir, a college student with his librarian mother's love of books, often stopped to browse at the sale bins outside a used bookstore on Yonge. The street had recently been chosen as the site for Toronto's first subway line, one constructed by the trench-and-cover method. This meant digging up the roadway and temporarily replacing much of the sidewalk with wooden planks and railing.

The bookstore owner sat just inside the door wearing a look that said *this too will pass*, meaning the dust, noise, and drop in foot traffic. But as the subway work dragged on he moved his chair deeper and deeper into the gloom of his shop and the sale bins brimmed.

One day Muir pulled from a pile an old volume called *Ponder's Hornbook*, a collection of aphorisms and anecdotes in no seeming order. It fell open at this anonymous entry: "When asked to name the smartest of all the animals an ancient wise man replied, 'Surely the megamensalopes, because they have avoided discovery by man.'"

Muir laid the book aside. But the megamensalopes remained in his

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thoughts. If they existed, he could understand why they kept their distance from man. How many animals had men hunted to extinction or worked to death or sent to the slaughterhouse? Before falling asleep that night Muir vowed he would be the one to find the sly creatures. Later he told this to some college friends over beer. When they laughed, Muir, who had his father's thin skin, never mentioned his quest to anyone again.

After college he went to work in his family's hardware supply business. He also joined the Toronto chapter of the Explorers' Club, with their pith helmets, easy chairs, and trophy heads on the walls. Like the other members, Muir was drawn to those regions the ancient cartographers marked with warnings: "Beyond this point there be dragons." Here, he was sure, the megamensalopes lived to escape discovery by man.

Muir gave his quarry a good deal of thought. He decided they couldn't be invisible. No animals were. But like chameleons they might be able to blend into the background. He imagined them as centaurs with human torsos on the bodies of small deer. But not too small, for they would need good-sized brainpans. For his part Muir knew he wasn't the smartest guy around. But that might actually help when he found the megamensalopes. Maybe he and their brightest would be able to communicate. He remembered reading an old Russian saying: the dumber the peasant the better his horse understands him.

To prepare for expeditions to distant locales, Muir spent several summer vacations leading a packhorse through the Canadian Rockies on a club project to follow by land Alexander Mackenzie's canoe trip to the Pacific in 1793. But he didn't care much for life in the great outdoors. Knots others tied with fluid grace he labored over, and in the end they slipped. The mountain peaks and river valleys did not charm him because he sensed no megamensalopes lived there.

One night as he lay thinking in the dark under canvas — reading by gasoline lantern gave him a headache — Muir decided his quarry must surely know it was not in man's nature to leave any place unmapped or peak unscaled. He also reasoned that if they were smarter than the other animals, the megamensalopes would be lonely and drawn to the same humans from whom they knew they had to hide. He likened them to the

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green men of Celtic mythology who in their curiosity stared at man out of the forest in masks made of foliage.

So Muir left the Explorers' Club and started looking closer at hand. He didn't think the megamensalopes would care for the suburbs where they might be mistaken for deer and hated for eating expensive shrubbery. No, they'd be city dwellers, feeding off humbler plants like the pungent ground ivy Canadians called Creeping Charlie which grew throughout Toronto in vacant lots and poorly tended lawns. And since we are what we eat, Muir named them Creeping Charlies. Megamensalopes was just too much of a mouthful.

WHEN SPRING BROUGHT the first ground ivy, Muir knew the Creeping Charlie herds were heading back from wintering in the States. On his lunch hours he would look for neighborhoods where the ground ivy grew thick. Then he would return at night, for he suspected the Creeping Charlies were nocturnal. But he avoided the more sordid parts of town. Not caring for them himself, he assumed the Creeping Charlies wouldn't either, particularly at night.

When he found his quarry, Muir meant to protect them from the likes of zoos or circus sideshows. Then, he hoped, the Creeping Charlies would choose him as their spokesman. He saw himself standing before the United Nations to scold the delegates for their exploitation of the creatures of this Earth.

The year his mother died, Muir was courting a young woman from accounting. As he spoke about their future, he gestured around the office and assured her he wanted more than this. He meant finding Creeping Charlie. She thought he meant a larger hardware supply business and liked his ambition. He proposed at Casa Lo Mien, a restaurant serving a fusion of Mexican, Chinese, and Canadian cuisine. During the meal he meant to bring up the Creeping Charlies, but by then he'd come to value her esteem and couldn't find the courage.

Muir made up many excuses to cover his spring and summer searching. After the creatures migrated south he tried to make up for it. But even when he and his wife were watching television or talking about their

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children or done making love, the hunt for Creeping Charlie was uppermost in his mind. The same year his father died, Muir's wife said she wanted a divorce. She said he was never there for her. He was always off on another planet.

The divorce was finalized during an exciting time in his search. Toronto's original subway plan envisioned an east-west line running beneath Queen Street to intersect with the Yonge Street line. But the city's rapid expansion northward made a line farther up on Bloor more practical. Muir began hearing stories of an abandoned subway station built under the Queen Street stop in anticipation of that earlier east-west line and suspected he'd found the Creeping Charlies' daytime lair. He made enquiries but the Toronto Transportation Commission, perhaps to cover up their own lack of foresight, denied such a station existed.

Prowling the upper station after work, Muir found several locked doors marked "Staff Only." Did they lead down to the sleeping creatures? He watched over several days at sunset hoping to see the Creeping Charlies escaping like bats into the twilight. He never did. Perhaps they used the subway tunnel itself to come and go. But whenever anyone went in or out the "Staff Only" doors, he checked the knobs. One day a door was left unlocked.

Inside, Muir followed a flight of bare cement steps down into the darkness. When he found the Creeping Charlies he would sit quietly and wait for them to wake. Then they would see they'd been found but that he meant them no harm.

But Muir's quarry wasn't there — only bare walls and ceilings — an unfinished version of the station above set on another axis. No traces of Creeping Charlie, no nests of leaves, no ground ivy for snacking, no pop bottles holding their water supply.

Muir returned to searching Toronto neighborhoods in no predictable pattern. He imagined a Creeping Charlie at his window at night, watching him plot his visits on a city map and warning the others. Once, seeing something out of the corner of his eye, Muir turned and was startled to see a face of unexceptional appearance, the kind any Creeping Charlie would cultivate. Of course it was only his own reflection in the glass. Then for a moment Muir imagined that his ancestors, an enterprising tribe of the Creeping Charlies, had blended in with man generations before. Over

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time they might even have forgotten who they really were. The next morning after his shower Muir examined his middle-aged butt in the bathroom mirror using a hand mirror and thought he saw in the wrinkles there the remnants of hindquarters. But then he threw back his head and laughed.

At last the day came when Muir had to admit he'd failed to find his quarry because the Creeping Charlies, for whatever reason, had chosen to live in the terrible parts of town. So be it. He would search them out. Muir could have hired a bodyguard to go with him. But he desired so much to deliver his "Creeping Charlie, I presume" line alone that he did not.

What Muir smelled wasn't crushed ground ivy. It was stale clothes on a staler body. Then an arm pinned him from behind and another ugly looking man stepped out of the darkness in front of him and began to go through Muir's pockets. He didn't have to be told not to resist. This wasn't the first time he'd been mugged. He never carried much with him on these expeditions.

Suddenly, over the ugly man's shoulder and down an alley, Muir saw someone waiting — clearly with a purpose — on the edge of a pool of light from a bare bulb over a back door. Except for the several days' growth of beard and the hunter's camouflage jacket, the figure could have been Muir's double. Was he a lookout? Did the door lead to the Creeping Charlies' lair?

Muir gave a shout and struggled to break loose. When the startled creature stepped into the darkness, Muir thought he heard the clatter of hooves. "Brother!" he called and fought to throw off his attackers. Then something came crashing down on the back of his head.

Dr. Lorne Osborne who worked the night emergency room at St. Michael's Hospital was a student of the afterlife. Having done all he could for dying patients, he often remained nearby to note down their last words, hoping to shed some light on the intersection of life and death. "Please," "I'm afraid" and "Forgiveness" were common though it was unclear whether the last was being asked for or granted.

The man lying on his examination table had been found on the street suffering from massive trauma caused by a severe blow to the head. He was

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a bit cleaner and better dressed than the neighborhood's usual residents. Osborne wondered what had brought him there. At one moment his patient called out for something. Was it for a cantaloupe? Another time it was for "megamen" which the doctor thought might be a rock group or comic book characters or an herbal medicine to enhance sexual powers.

Suddenly and very clearly, as though uttering a password, the man said, "Creeping Charlie." Then he smiled and died. Osborne knew the smile. The mind was coaxing its old sweetheart the body to come out of its dark corner into the light. "Don't be afraid," it was saying. "Death has found us as we knew it would someday."

A few weeks later, going through his notes, Osborne found the Creeping Charlie reference and decided to Google it. After a lengthy list of botanical entries on ground ivy, its eradication, and the plant's use in France to flavor beer, Osborne came to this perplexing one: "When asked who was the smartest man, a wise megamensalope said, "Gotta be what's-his-name, the guy who almost found us, the one who tagged us Creeping Charlie. Gotta be."

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION 1. Title of Publication, THE MAGAZINE OF FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION.2. Publication no. 588-960. 3. Date of filing, Sept. 26, 2007. 4. Issue Frequency, 11 times per year. 5. Number of issues published annually, 11. 6. Annual subscription price $50.99. 7. Known office of publication, 105 Leonard Street, Jersey City, NJ 07307. 8. Mailing address of headquarters, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. 9. Publisher, Gordon Van Gelder, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030, Editor, Gordon Van Gelder, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030, Managing editor, none. 10. Owner, Spilogale, Inc, Gordon Van Gelder, Barbara J. Norton, PO Box 3447, Hoboken, NJ 07030. 11. Known Bondholders, mortgagees and other security holders owning or holding 1% or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities, None. 15. Extent and nature of circulation: a. Total no. copies (net press run), average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months 26,796, actual no. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date 26,854. b. Paid/requested circulation 1) average no. copies outside-county mail subscriptions 12,800, actual no. copies 12,500. 2) average no. copies in-county subscriptions: 31, actual no. copies in-county 30 3) sales through dealers and carriers, average no. copies 3,658 actual no. copies single issue 7,972 c. total paid and/or requested circulation average no. 16,769, actual no. copies 20,797 d. Free or nominal rate distribution by mail 1) outside-county average no. copies 280, actual no. copies 295 2) in-county average no. copies 5, actual no. copies 5 3) mailed at other classes through the USPS average no. copies 170, actual no. copies, 180 4) outside the mail average no. copies 0, actual no. copies, 0 e. total free distribution average no. copies 455, actual no. copies 470 f. total distribution average no. copies 17,224, actual no. copies 21,267 g. copies not distributed average no. 7,444, actual no. copies 5,032 h. total average no. copies 24,668, actual no. copies 26,299 i. Percent paid/requested circulation 97. 17. Gordon Van Gelder, Publisher.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

HOW I WONDER WHAT YOU ARE

IT'S appropriate, somehow, that Neil Gaiman's *Stardust* originated in an escape from a tipsy party at a fantasy convention. Supposedly, back in 1991, Gaiman wandered out into the Tucson night during the World Fantasy Convention and experienced the full visual impact of seeing a star fall in the desert sky for the first time. An idea was born which he quickly shared with illustrator Charles Vess. A short comic series was thereafter introduced, which was then adapted into a graphic novel, which was then adapted into a full-length non-illustrated novel, which was then adapted for the screen (by writers other than Gaiman) and recently released as a feature movie.

That's a lot of adapting for one grouchy fallen star to have to go through, so it is not that surprising that the movie version of *Stardust* seems to suffer from a certain identity crisis.

There are other reasons equally easy to identify.

Mr. Gaiman's story about a young Victorian lad named Tristan who promises his capricious lady-love to bring back a fallen star in exchange for a kiss and her hand in marriage is, for all its quaintness, a fairy tale for adults. But grown-up fantasy fables are something Hollywood has always had a hard time doing properly. They know their way around kiddie classics, old *(The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe)* and new *(Harry Potter and Whatever It Is This Year)*. And major studios are certainly capable — especially when they utilize animation — of creating a "family film" fairy tale (e.g., the three Shrek movies) that can as easily

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entertain parents as their little ones.

But a fairy tale designed for adults that children might also enjoy is a much rarer cinematic artifact. Adults can be much more persnickety. They may not be more sophisticated in their tastes, but they are certainly more jaundiced in their viewpoints. Adults have a much harder time giving themselves over to fantasy than children. And today they find it practically impossible to give themselves over to love stories.

I think one of the reasons adult audiences, along with teens, 'tweens, and kids, flocked to see the LOTR series is that the trilogy was essentially a war story. And, for good or ill, war is something we believe in.

Romance? Not so much.

It's hard to name a recent American fairy tale predicated on a romance that really works as adult culture. The one that comes to mind for me is Rob Reiner and William Goldman's *The Princess Bride*, which is now (shockingly) twenty years old. Like the Shrek movies that were so clearly influenced by it, *Princess Bride* is very much a parody of the very nostalgic culture it was replicating and celebrating. Yes, it had a charming love story, but even that love story was filled with sight-gags, bad jokes, and plenty of physical schtick along with longing looks and daring adventure.

Clearly, the people who adapted *Stardust* toyed with the idea of making it a pastiche of traditional fairy tales, by way of *The Princess Bride*. But they did not. Was it because they thought better of it or that they just couldn't pull it off? I'd guess that it was one part the impulse to stay as close as possible to Gaiman's original love/quest/adventure tale, which is played fairly straight as a faerie story. And the rest of it was lack of skill with this particular genre.

It was Gaiman himself who granted filmmaker Matthew Vaughn the rights to adapt his fable. Yet Vaughn is a relatively inexperienced director, with only a British gangster thriller called *Layer Cake* (2004) on his c.v., along with producing credits for his work with Guy Ritchie on several modern thug capers like *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998), and *Snatch* (2000). That being so, Vaughn would appear a somewhat incongruous choice as helmer for this particular project.

After one pass on the script, perhaps he agreed. At that point

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Jane Goldman, a friend of Gaiman who is perhaps best known as the host of a British TV show on the paranormal, tried her hand.

The end result is a film that is not without its charms, but which ends up having no particular sense of style or tone. Hence the overall impression that *Stardust* leaves is one of vague disappointment. However, this disappointment — in all but one regard — has nothing to do with the movie's stellar cast.

Key to the proceedings is the casting of young Tristan Thorn, a lad from a peaceful but insular village called Wall. Tristan leaves all that he knows behind to go on his romantic quest, and the adventures he has along the way transform him from a shy and gawky boy into a noble and confident man. So an actor had to be found who could portray a lightning-fast maturation process, and do it convincingly.

This is achieved through the casting of a relative unknown named Charlie Cox for the part. Cox is fresh-faced and eager, as befits his role, and he captures both the good heart and the developing manliness of Tristan with an easy grace.

Although young Cox is a newcomer, he is surrounded by an experienced and respected cast. Sienna Miller *(Factory Girl, Casanova)* plays the relatively small role of Victoria, the willful beauty that Tristan initially pines for. But it is not until Master Thorn leaves his homeland for the enchanted but violent world of Stormhold (aka Gaiman's Faerie) that the action picks up and the big names arrive.

While Tristan hopes to collect the fallen star as a love token, others seek it for more sinister reasons. In one subplot, a sisterly coven of evil crones craves the fresh heart of a fallen star to reverse their rather advanced state of age and decay. One sister is chosen to hunt down the celestial body, and as she gobbles the last of the trio's hoarded youth, she becomes...Michelle Pfeiffer!

It is certainly refreshing to see a well-known beauty so enthusiastically inhabit a hag with thin hair and wrinkles aplenty. And the gorgeous Ms. Pfeiffer really seems to relish her chance to play withered evil. (Taken along with her other recent role as the tightly wound villainess of this summer's musical, *Hairspray*, you'd almost conclude that Michelle has decided to transition away from her earlier fame as one of Tinseltown's loveliest leading ladies with a complete and absolute vengeance.)

Meanwhile, at the castle tower

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of Stormhold, a murderous old King (Peter O'Toole) is dying, surrounded by his surviving sons — who, like their father before them, are not above killing their own siblings to get a better shot at a crown. Rupert Everett is dispatched surprisingly quickly, joining his several other ghostly brothers in a spectral peanut gallery that comments on the proceedings throughout. They take special interest in the efforts of surviving brothers, the most ruthless and enterprising being Primus (Jason Flemyng), who seeks the fallen star for the gemstone she possesses that will guarantee his ascendancy to the throne.

But none of the subplots is more fanciful — or more wildly divergent from the plot of Neil Gaiman's original tale — than the lightning-capturing pirate who, on a rusty sky galleon, plucks Tristan and his star from a cloud.

That pirate, Captain Shakespeare, is none other than Robert De Niro. With his tough reputation in film, he is easy to believe as the "ruthless marauder and cold-blooded killer" he tries to project. But this pirate captain has a secret. And De Niro plays it to the hilt. (Or should I say to the end of his feather boa?)

The Captain Shakespeare scenes, and De Niro's sense of fun with them, are among the high points of the movie. A cameo by Ricky Gervais as a scalawag named Ferdy the Fence seems to be cut from similarly extravagant cloth. The gawking Greek chorus of murdered noblemen likewise add a moment or two of fun to the proceedings. These scenes surely exemplify the filmmakers' haphazard inclination toward making their movie a farcical comedy.

But when the princely ghosts and De Niro's pirate queen aren't around, the movie seems to flounder for a sense of itself. Alackaday, I fear that the greatest problem the movie faces lies with the central character; the one who is the object of every other character's focus; the fallen star called Yvaine, played by Claire Danes.

Now, Claire Danes is a fine young actor, and she has been proving it for more than a decade. She is even a fan of Mr. Gaiman's work. (She actually wrote an introduction to the 1997 Sandman spin-off, *Death: The Time of Your Life*, as well as voiced San in Mr. Gaiman's English screenplay for Hayao Miyazaki's masterpiece, *Princess Mononoke*.) Unfortunately, Ms. Danes may be miscast for the role of a large, gaseous, self-luminous astronomical body in human form.

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On the other hand, I would be hard-pressed to name a female performer better suited to the task.

Gaiman's concept for the character is plausible enough, in a fantastical sense. If you were a celestial body, who fell — hard — to an enchanted version of Earth, injuring your (now human-appearing) leg, and immediately after your harsh arrival discovered that people of the mere mortal, royal, and supernatural variety were all hunting you down, most of them with violence in their hearts, you would not be a happy camper.

You'd be frightened, bewildered, and just plain crabby.

This is how the role of Yvaine is written, and this is how Ms. Danes plays her. The catch is that this type of character wears out her welcome on screen very quickly. (Less so, somehow, in a graphic or prose novel.) The cinematic Yvaine ends up looking and sounding like a high-maintenance beauty with a penchant for whining. In filmic fairy tales, these women are usually the evil stepsisters, and they usually end up humiliated or destroyed, just as the audience would wish.

But in *Stardust*, this bellyaching belle is actually the female lead. And that fact only contributes to the film's tonal issues.

You may be able to draw (or even write) a breathtakingly exquisite ethereal being that is cranky as hell but still absolutely enchanting. Trying to act one out is a bigger challenge. And Claire Danes and this movie can't quite pull it off.

It doesn't help that, with all of the movie's hexes and murders and chasing around, the relationship between Tristan and Yvaine struggles in its development. We are supposed to see love blossom between the young man and the celestial demi-goddess he first imprisons and later defends. But the bond doesn't evolve. It is simply announced — and in the most unfortunate manner possible. Yvaine proclaims her love to Tristan while he is in the bespelled form of a dormouse. (No acting on Charlie Cox's part required.)

It's a sweetly absurd scene, yet it's played surprisingly straight. And maybe that's the problem. If *Stardust* had been a bit more madcap and captured some of the loopiness of the old screwball romantic comedies (or even of modern European adult fantasy fables like Jean-Pierre Jeunet's glorious *Amélie*), it would have worked better as a film. Lending the proceedings a real sense of enchantment —

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and not just FX — would have been a nice touch, too.

Director Vaughn sadly never found a real vision for his movie. He actually told the *New York Times* recently that with *Stardust* he "wanted to make a nonfantasy fantasy movie." Even if I knew what that meant, I doubt that I'd agree with it. And what does that kind of a negative concept leave us with anyway?

Twinkle, Twinkle, Fallen Star, How I Wonder What You Are! And that goes double for your movie. ☞

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Mr. Irvine's last F&SF *story, "Wizard's Six" (May 2007), was a hard-hitting high fantasy story. And now for something completely different, we present a lighthearted science fiction story that starts off in an odd corner of the Wolverine State.*

Mystery Hill

By Alex Irvine

DURING THE THIRTY-THREE years since he'd bought Mystery Hill from Ford Albritton after Ford got tongue cancer and couldn't do the spiel anymore, Ken Kassarjian had been debunked more times than he could count. Every year or so, sometimes more when economic times got tough and grad schools at all the state universities swelled up with people who knew they couldn't get a job, some bespectacled muckraker would pull off the interstate and take all kinds of measurements. Their questions to him varied all the way from aren't you ashamed to be pulling this scam to you do know this water doesn't really run uphill, don't you — and Ken always said the same thing. I believe it, he said. And the people who come here, you better believe more of them believe it when they leave than did when they got here.

He could understand why the university types and crusading journalists needed to debunk him, or at least write tongue-in-cheek features about cranky Kassarjian and his tourist trap. Water wasn't supposed to run uphill. If water could run uphill in one place, it might start doing it

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somewhere else, and then you'd have cats lying down with dogs and other such apocalyptic scenery. Truth be told, Ken was a great deal more put out by the true believers of every stripe who arrived like caravanning pilgrims during the summer. If he had to hear one more story about lines of power in the earth or aliens who lived under the North Pole or interdimensional vortices, he wasn't going to be responsible for his actions. The worst was the Reptilian crowd, who had managed to mash every self-respecting conspiracy theory since the Pyramids into one Grand Unified Theory of Gobbledygook. They gave him books, and accused him of being a Reptilian himself, which offended Ken a little because as he'd gotten up in years his face had acquired more than its share of wrinkles, a fact that offended his internal image of himself as a twenty-six-year-old squirt lean and mean from two tours in Vietnam. On these occasions, and these occasions only, Ken Kassarjian was apt to growl, "I didn't serve my country to have some moonpie wacko call me a lizard." Invariably his hostility proved to the wacko in question that Ken was indeed a Reptilian; he had evidence of this in the form of a number of articles mentioning both him and Mystery Hill in the more out-there conspiracy magazines, sent to Mystery Hill as what he assumed must have been a triumphant gesture on the authors' part. He took vindictive pride in the fact that he had spawned a small twig on the conspiracy tree all by himself, involving his Army unit — he'd done nothing but repair trucks, for crying out loud — and some kind of anti-gravity hocus-pocus. Apparently Vietnamese Reptilians could levitate, or maybe it was all of the Communist Reptilians. Ken didn't waste his time reading the articles they sent him.

It was the Wednesday after Memorial Day when the Toyota minivan with the professor in it pulled into the parking lot. Ken had her pegged as a professor right off the bat. He put down his rake — he'd been leveling the gravel between the fourth and eleventh holes of the minigolf course — and said, "Just tell me up front if I'm a Reptilian, eh?"

She gave him a look. He gave it right back. "Reptilian?" she repeated.

"Lady, you have college professor written all over you," Ken said. "What I want to know is, are you one of the debunkers or one of the wackos? I got to know which jokes to have ready."

"No, I — " She looked over her shoulder, back down US-12 in the direction of Clinton. "It's just odd that you said 'Reptilian' because I ran

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over something on the way here, and right before I hit it, I thought it was some kind of huge lizard." She shook her head and walked over to shake his hand. "Fara Oussemitski."

"Ken Kassarjian. Probably a snapping turtle. It gets a little warm, they like to sun themselves on the road. Truth is, if it was a snapper, you might not even have busted its shell. I've seen them walk right off after getting run over. Was this just back about a mile?"

"Could have been," said Professor Oussemitski, who was a sight easier on the eyes than the run of the academic mill. Early thirties, Ken figured. Probably just got her job. One of these postmodern types who tried to make highbrow hay out of stuff like cereal boxes. What was the word, semiotics or something like that. She had on little glasses with black wire frames, her hair was cut to look like she hadn't combed it in a month, and she wore a little stud in her lower lip. Not your standard professor look, although some of the cultural-studies types he'd run across made a practice of bringing a little bit of Paris to southern Michigan. Ken liked her. He made it a practice to decide right away whether he liked someone or not, and Fara Oussemitski went into the plus column. He'd still lied to her about what she'd run over in the road, though.

"Well, Professor," he said, "I'm about to head out on an errand, but if you want to look around, Jamie up in the ticket booth will get you started. I'll be back in a half-hour or so."

"All right," she said.

"What kind of professor are you, anyway?" he asked as he wrenched open the door of his crumbling F-150. Her reply was lost in the squeal of the hinges. "Say again?"

"Physics," she said. He started the truck and drove away.

He found where she'd had her incident, but Little Boozy Boswell had gotten there first. Crap crapity crap, thought Ken. A physics professor and Little Boozy. If it wasn't after Memorial Day, I'd shut down and go bass fishing.

Little Boozy — so monikered because his father had been nicknamed Boozy since the Depression — was squatting on his considerable haunches examining the mess in the westbound lanes of US-12, right by the turnoff to the state park. Ken pulled across the road and sat idling on the shoulder,

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facing the wrong way so he could talk to Little Boozy through the passenger window.

"It's another one, Ken," Little Boozy said. He shifted his weight as a car blew by in the opposite lane, the gust of its passage flipping Little Boozy's hair into his face.

"Another turtle," Ken said.

"Hell you say." Little Boozy was prone to theories, one of which held that Wamplers Lake had a colony of aquatic lizard-men living in its depths. Ken had pointed out that Wamplers was only thirty-nine feet deep, which meant that if the lizard-men had two-story houses, they'd have fish finders bouncing off their roofs all the time. Little Boozy's reaction was to expand his theory to accommodate a subterranean city below the lakebed. Ken, in turn, had expanded his assessment of Little Boozy to accommodate the possibility of fetal alcohol syndrome or plain animal stupidity. Which was not to say that he genuinely thought the scrambled mess of gray, green, and red on the pavement was a turtle — it wasn't — but he did not for a second believe that there were lizard-men in Wamplers Lake. The truth, which Ken had approached in minute increments over his years at Mystery Hill, was much stranger. And now he had a physics professor to deal with.

He got out of the truck and went over to stand next to Little Boozy, who was displaying an impressive length of plumber's crack to those unfortunates driving west on US-12. Everything about him was big. Big beard, big gut, big mechanic's shirt flapping in the breeze. He looked like a bear hunched over a kill.

She really nailed this one, Ken thought; there's nothing left of it. Might as well be a turtle. "If this is a lizard-man, Boozy, you couldn't prove it by me," he said.

"Don't you think I know what you're up to?" Little Boozy said.

"Fact is, I don't," Ken said.

"Okay, smart guy," Little Boozy said. He went to his own pickup and got a flat-bladed shovel and a plastic bucket. When he'd scooped the mess into the bucket, he clamped a lid on it and put it in the cab, then locked the doors.

"Boozy," said Ken. "You really think I'm going to steal your turtle?"

Little Boozy walked up close enough that his belly brushed the

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buttons of Ken's shirt. "Let me tell you something," he said. "You can make fun of dumb old Little Boozy all you want. But you stop by our place sometime, and I'll show you something'll change your mind."

"Thanks," Ken said. "How's tonight?"

He'd meant it sarcastically, but it didn't come out right, and Little Boozy blinked. "Tonight," he repeated. "Okay, then. Go down the road a piece past the house; there's an old cabin on the north side. I'll be there." He unlocked his truck and got in. "Set you straight," he said through the window, before roaring into a U-turn and away back down US-12.

Now how in the hell did I manage to do that? Ken wondered. Then he remembered the physics professor wandering around his property and he dragged the F-150 through a U-turn in the other direction, hoping that Fara Whatsername hadn't found his collection.

She hadn't, but she had done something far worse. She had unpacked real, actual scientific instruments right smack in the middle of the tour and was for the love of Christ taking measurements while tourists wandered by and took pictures of each other standing at an angle off a brick or pointing down at the part of the creek where the water flowed uphill. Ken rarely lost his temper, but seeing this brought him right up to it. He marched over to where the professor was peering into some kind of monitor, restrained himself from grabbing her arm — only because he figured she'd have him arrested — and said through gritted teeth, "I would hate to kill you in front of those kids over there. But I would hate it even worse if you kept on with your experiments. Hell of a situation you put me in."

She held up a hand. "Shh. Almost done."

That's a fine-looking hand, Ken thought despite himself. Strong fingers, well shaped. "Goddammit," he growled. "Done with what?"

"Measuring fluctuations in the local gravity. Now be quiet a minute."

"Don't you...what?" Fluctuations in the local gravity? Ken worked the phrase over in his head. Then worked it over again. If he wasn't mistaken, Professor Fara Oussemitski was telling him that Mystery Hill wasn't a hoax. This made him suspicious, since if she wasn't a debunker that made her a wacko, and since he'd already decided he liked her, that meant he liked one of the wackos. This contravened one of the cardinal principles of Ken Kassarjian's life, which was to disassociate himself from

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wackos as completely as was possible. Close on the heels of these thoughts came the realization that since he'd agreed to go over to Little Boozy's that night, that principle had been violated not once but twice in the same day, which clearly meant that he should shut down and go bass fishing on the off chance that he'd catch an unwary lizard-man over to Wamplers Lake.

Professor Oussemitski stood. "There," she said. A portable printer on the ground, next to whatever apparatus she'd been monitoring, started spitting out graphs and numbers.

"There what?" Ken said.

"Done for right now," she said. "I'll have to look these results over and figure out what to do from there. But if things work out like I think they will, I'll have at least part of the grammar today."

"Grammar?" Ken said.

She gave him an appraising and faintly bemused look. "You have an office? We should probably discuss this there."

"I've got a better idea," he said, and went to let Jamie know.

KEN HAD OWNED the same boat since 1964, a fourteen-foot War Eagle with a two-stroke Evinrude outboard that was probably illegal and certainly on its last legs. Every spring he took it apart and rebuilt it, just on general principles, and every spring he got it started after an ordeal of starter-yanking and smoke-farting. He kept it in his garage, down at the end of the dirt road that wound around the perimeter of Mystery Hill. Half an hour after Fara Oussemitski had packed up her gear, they were cruising slowly along the southern shore of Wamplers Lake. When they got to the edge of a certain cluster of lily pads, at least a couple of hundred yards from the nearest lakeside cottage, Ken cut the motor and let the boat drift. They were over a dropoff he had been fishing since he was a kid. He dug out a collapsible spinning rig he kept under one of the seats.

"You got a license?" he asked.

She shook her head without looking up from the pages she'd printed.

Ken clipped on a little Mepps spinner and flipped it out along the edge of the lily pads, drawing it slowly back in and waiting for Professor Oussemitski to enlighten him. "Can take smallmouth out of here all day

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long," he said, just to hear himself talk. "If the damn crappie will leave you alone."

She was still reading. Ken had a momentary sensation of being on a bad date. "I know this guy named Little Boozy Boswell," he said. "Little Boozy says there's lizard-men living on the bottom of this lake."

This got her to look up. "Little Boozy?" she said. "Is there a Big Boozy?"

"Well, Boozy used to be just Boozy, but then when Little Boozy came along, everybody started calling him Big Boozy. Believe he was a rumrunner during Prohibition. He's coming up on a hundred years old now, and Little Boozy's a lot bigger than Big Boozy. But they're both crazy as bedbugs."

A little smile was trying not to show itself on Fara Oussemitski's face. "What about these lizard-men?"

Ken deliberated. "What about fluctuations in my gravity?"

"Your gravity?"

Annoyed, Ken snapped off a longer cast this time and the Mepps landed eight feet into the lily pads. "You know goddamn well what I mean," he said. Certain that if he looked at her she would be smiling, and that if he saw her smiling he would either kiss her or throw her out of the boat, he concentrated on extricating the Mepps from its lily-pad prison. In the back of his mind he was wondering how many lures he'd lost in this spot. At least one a year, was his initial reckoning. After a couple of minutes hauling this way and that, he lost this one, too.

While he was tying a new leader on, Professor Oussemitski said, "Which do you want first, the weird part or the weirder part?"

Ken shrugged. "Professor, there is nothing you can say any weirder than the stuff I hear from the crowd who thinks I'm a Reptilian. You go ahead and tell it the way it makes sense to you."

She laughed. "Well, it might or might not make sense whichever way I tell it. And it's Fara."

Oh, is it, thought Ken. Then he cut himself off at the knees. She isn't flirting with you, dumbass, he told himself. You're thirty years older than she is, twenty-five at least, and physics professors don't flirt with proprietors of shady roadside attractions.

Only maybe she was about to tell him that his attraction wasn't quite as shady as he'd imagined.

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"Ever hear of string theory?" she asked him.

"Matter of fact, I have," Ken said. "There is a segment of my clientele that believes my little piece of the Irish Hills is some kind of interdimensional vortex. Some of 'em go into the creek right where it runs uphill, and they do something, some kind of interpretive dance maybe, that's supposed to get them sucked through into another dimension. I never seen it work."

Fara was staring at him with her lips slightly pursed. "Not that I believe it," Ken added. He found another Mepps, dropped it back in the tackle box, and went for a rubber worm that bore the marks of maybe twenty years' worth of smallmouth bass.

"Well," Fara said. "That is interesting. So you know about the multiple dimensions?"

"Yup. And the...what are they called, branes or something? Calabi-Yau spaces?"

She broke into a brilliant smile. "Ken, this is not at all what I expected when I came out here."

"I'm going to take that as a compliment rather than an assumption on your part that anyone who runs a place like Mystery Hill is a conniving bumpkin."

"So it was meant," she said. "Well...hm. I'll tell you in a minute, but the fact that you're not a conniving bumpkin has distracted me. Tell me something: why do you do this?"

"Go fishing with physics professors?"

"Run a tourist trap that everyone thinks is fake."

Ken cast, landing the worm perfectly along the edge of the lily pads, and reeled it slowly back in, giving it a little flip every so often so the fish wouldn't get bored as they watched it go by. "You think it's fake?"

"We'll get to that. First answer my question."

"All right," he said. "I came here in 1973, when I got home from Vietnam. Just driving down the road and saw the place, stopped in to see if I could spot the gag. And what happened was first of all, I liked it, and second of all there was this big vanload of kids from some summer camp. That's what did it. Man, they loved that place. I thought to myself, I wouldn't mind working here if it meant I could be around kids that happy all the time. So I went looking for whoever was running it, and met this

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old bird named Ford Albritton. I asked him if there was any work, and he said — I'll never forget this — 'Hell, son, you got ten thousand dollars you can have the place. I got cancer of the tongue and I don't plan on dying in this ticket booth.'

"Well, I didn't have ten thousand dollars, but I did have a stepfather who was an exec at GM, and he cosigned a loan for me, and now it's thirty-three years later and I'm still here."

"Huh," Fara said. She was looking out over the lake. Ken was struck by a sudden wish for a lizard-man to appear, just so they'd stop talking about him. "That's a sweet story."

Ken shrugged and flipped the worm out toward the lily pads again. "Problem is, all those kids come back, and some of them have turned into Reptilian wackos in the meantime. I still love 'em, but sometimes I wish I could make a rule that nobody old enough to vote can go past the minigolf course. Although the kids around here aren't any picnic, either. Teenagers, I mean. The little ones are fine. But I got enough problems with the older ones that I'd just as soon jackhammer up the goddamn minigolf course and plant tomatoes. Damn, where are all the fish today?"

"Maybe we're talking too much. We should be quiet."

"If we're quiet, I'll never find out about fluctuations in my gravity." Plus that comment about grammar, Ken thought.

"Well, do you want information or fish?"

"Don't feel like waiting for the fish." Ken reeled in the worm, picked a stray bit of leafy flotsam from one of its hooks, and stowed the rod.

Fara waited, sipping from her bottle of water. "Okay. So you know about the eleven-dimension thing, and you know what a brane is." Ken nodded. "Where gravity comes in is interesting, because it turns out that unlike all of the other strings, which are stuck in their particular brane, the strings that allow gravitons might be shaped in such a way that allows them to move between universes. If there are parallel universes."

Ken had a lump in his throat that he was sure must look like a goiter. He swallowed and tried to play it cool. "Okay."

"That's what would make gravity so much weaker than the other forces," Fara went on. "It's traveled so far that it gets attenuated like sound waves propagating through an atmosphere."

"Uh huh."

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"So I've been...I should confess something here, Ken. This isn't the first time I've taken measurements at Mystery Hill."

Now the lump felt like it was climbing up next to Ken's uvula. "Is that right," he said.

"I've kind of been sneaking in. Didn't want to bother you until I had a clearer idea of whether anything was really happening."

She's young, she's cute, and she does guerrilla physics at tourist traps, Ken thought. This is a slobberknocker of a girl.

"I'll understand if you're angry," Fara said, "but I've found a couple of interesting things."

Like the collection in the shed behind the barn? Ken wondered. He didn't say anything; if she'd seen that, he'd find out about it soon enough. "Are you about to tell me that gravity really isn't right at my place?"

"Well," she said with another brilliant smile, "now I don't have to."

AFTER THAT, he had to get back to relieve Jamie and close the place. Ken never kept it open much after dark because the local teenagers, many psychologically altered and all bored from the absence of available mischief in the Irish Hills, tended to do this weird collective pogo-jumping dance, complete with incomprehensible singing, on the seventeenth hole. Never any of the others. They'd worn the Astroturf right off number seventeen three times in the last year and a half or so. Like some kind of adolescent cult, Ken thought.

He dropped Fara off next to her van. "Mind if I come back in the morning?" she asked.

Do I mind, Ken thought. "What, now you're asking?"

"Great," she said. "See you bright and early."

He watched her drive off feeling vaguely as if he was experiencing some kind of disturbance in his personal gravity. Here I've been fending off the bored divorcees for thirty years, he thought, and now comes the payoff. Whoops. Can't let that train of thought get very far. As penance he imagined all of the times he might have succumbed to momentary lust or ongoing loneliness and ended up with an accidental wife in the double-wide out behind the barn. Oddly, knowing that he hadn't exploited the bizarre phenomenon of tourist-trap groupies didn't make him feel any

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better right then. All it meant was that he was free to let his momentary crush on Fara Oussemitski go further than it otherwise would, which meant he was dooming himself to a big letdown when she packed up her instruments and headed back to whatever university town it was she'd come from.

"What are you staring at?" Jamie asked him.

He looked over at her and saw that she had positioned herself so she could follow his gaze eastbound down US-12. "Nothing," he said. "Thinking. Little Boozy hit something on the road today and swears it's a lizard-man."

"Little Boozy's been hitting his own stash," Jamie said with that potent disdain available only to girls in late adolescence.

Ken started to ask her what she meant about his stash — who else's stash would Little Boozy be hitting? — but he didn't want to know any more about Little Boozy Boswell than he was already going to find out in about an hour. He sent Jamie on her way and went around locking everything up. There were seven of the kids on number seventeen tonight. "Goddammit," Ken said. They were in a rough circle, jumping up and down in some kind of pattern that he couldn't quite suss out, and all the while singing. Well, chanting. Reminded him of the fad for Gregorian chants that had gone around a few years before, only dissonant and kind of nauseating. Had a weird undertone like that Australian tree-branch thing. What was it called...didgeridoo. Something like that.

He opened the cover of the course's electrical panel and flicked the lights on and off. "Out," he called. "All of you."

Whatever pattern there was in the pogoing, it fell apart, and the chanting broke up. "Mr. K," one of the kids said, "this is poor."

Poor? Ken thought. First time I've heard that one. He had an attack of curmudgeonliness, inwardly denouncing the kids, their slang, their music, their drugs, and anything else he could think of. Then he remembered what his father had said the first time Ken had put The Doors on the family turntable.

"Whatever," he said. "I'm closed. Come back tomorrow."

The kids shuffled away, but Ken could see that the dance or whatever it was hadn't quite left them. They swayed from side to side as they walked, not in the way that teenagers always do. Something rhythmic and

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secondhand about it, as if they were hearing and responding to invisible signals. Spooky. When they were gone, Ken went through the nightly ritual of checking all of the attractions for stowaways and/or lost items. He had, over the years, come to look forward to this part of the day, when he had Mystery Hill all to himself, and he could experience it the way he had the first day he'd come, back in 1973. On the path from the minigolf course up toward the barn, the first ripples of lightheadedness made him smile. The plumb bob hanging from a frame outside the barn was eight degrees from true, about average. The most he'd ever seen it vary was to about fifteen degrees, and when that happened he had to issue an advisory to the pregnant women who showed up. Between ten and fifteen degrees, they all started to puke, which didn't do much for business. In the barn, he stood on the strange part of the floor, looking at himself in the mirror. Eyeballing his reflection, he figured he was about ten degrees off vertical, which was a little more than average, and different from the plumb bob. Hm. Maybe he should check and see if one of the clients had messed with the frame. There were always smartasses trying to contribute their own little bits of dysfunction. Ken set a golf ball on the plank that angled up from a table to the windowsill, and it rolled up just like it was supposed to. He got a little tremor in his stomach. Fluctuations in gravity, Fara had said. Grammar.

Next on the locking-up itinerary was the shed out behind his double-wide, but something about Fara's visit, and Little Boozy's veiled promises, made Ken reluctant to look at his collection tonight. He wondered if Fara had seen it; if so, she was one cool customer. He hadn't gotten a read on her either way, even though he'd thought her admission of sneaking around after hours had been leading up to a question about the shed. "Argh," Ken said to the barn. He went back to the double-wide, put on *Weird Scenes Inside the Gold Mine*, and boiled up some mac and cheese so he'd have something for his beer to wash down.

The last thing in the world I want to do, he thought, is go over to Little Boozy's house and subject myself to his theories. Then he corrected himself. The truth was, he did want to see what Little Boozy had in his shed; he just didn't want Little Boozy around while he saw it. This was a dilemma, and sneaking around Boswell outbuildings wasn't a viable option, since Big Boozy was free with his buckshot and possessed neither

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the sensory sharpness nor the patience for Ken to identify himself before Big Boozy started shooting.

"You know what," Ken said out loud to an imagined group of Reptilian conspiracy types, "it's Little Boozy you should be talking to. Crazy bastards."

He finished his beer, rinsed the mac and cheese crud out of the bowl, and fired up the truck. Little Boozy lived down a dirt road that angled off another dirt road somewhere between US-12 and Ohio. Remembering his directions, Ken drove past the turnoff that led directly to the Boswells' ancestral manse and waited until he caught the outline of a shed in the periphery of the truck's headlights. He parked on the side of the road and killed the truck's lights, taking a minute to steel himself for the coming onslaught of lizard-man theories. The light of the waxing moon was enough for him to pick out a path through the brush to the shack, and by the time Ken had gotten to it his eyes had adjusted to the darkness and he could tell that a dim light was on inside.

"Hey," he said. The back of his neck prickled in anticipation of buckshot. "Little Boozy. You in there?"

"Yeah, man, come on in," came Little Boozy's voice from inside.

Ken found the door and opened it with a squeal. Immediately upon entering he kicked over a jar of something and heard its contents dripping through gaps in the floorboards. "Goddamn, man," Little Boozy said. "Watch your feet. That's money, there."

The light in the shed came from a kerosene lantern that Little Boozy had turned down so low that its wick was barely glowing. There was a smell in the air, ghosting around the edges of Little Boozy's own emissions, that vaguely reminded Ken of chicken broth. He got a little queasy.

"Money?" Ken said. He was thinking of Jamie's comment about Boozy's own stash. "Didn't know your family was still in this business, Little Boozy. Prohibition's been over a long time."

"Not for what I got, it hasn't. Check this out."

Little Boozy turned up the lantern a touch, and Ken saw that two walls of the shed were entirely taken up with metal shelves lined two and three deep with mason jars. It wasn't bright enough to see what was in the jars, but there was enough light to see that most of them contained solid bits suspended in a clear fluid. Now Ken was thinking of weird specimens in

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a biology lab and that thought in association with the lingering specter of chicken broth wasn't doing his stomach any good at all.

"Ew," he said.

"Ew?" Little Boozy echoed. "Come on, Ken, you was in Vietnam."

"I fixed trucks," Ken said, with the horrible feeling he got when he knew he was about to be dragged into the Reptilian conspiracy again.

"Whatever," Little Boozy said. He picked up a flashlight from the table that took up most of the space not occupied by shelves. "I told you I was going to set you straight. How about this? On the house."

He took down a jar from the top shelf nearest the table and poured its contents through a strainer into a watering can. Then he blew the dust out of a drinking glass he found somewhere in the tabletop debris and poured about an inch of liquid into it. "Give her a try," he said, holding the glass out to Ken.

"Right," Ken said.

"Seriously," Little Boozy said. "Here, I'll show you." He tossed the contents of the glass back like a shot of tequila. "Cures what ails you."

"Don't know that anything ails me."

"Trust me, this'll change your mind." Little Boozy filled the glass and held it out to Ken again. Ken was more disturbed by the idea of drinking after Little Boozy than by whatever was actually in the glass, but to his astonishment he found himself accepting the glass and drinking from it. The liquid was cool, and had a faint burnt taste, along with a slight bitterness and behind that a little sting that got his eyes watering.

"Okay," he said when he'd put the glass down. "Now what?"

"Lizard-man tea," Little Boozy said. "You're in for a treat."

The beam of the flashlight illuminated a row of jars, each of which had a small piece of one of the things that weren't turtles in it. Ken's stomach did a slow roll, and not just from nausea; he was thinking of his own shed with his own collection, and it was no easy thing to be forced into a confrontation with the fact that you had common interests with a guy like Little Boozy Boswell.

Tomorrow morning I'm taking my collection out to the dump, Ken thought.

"So," he forced himself to say. "How is this money?"

"First thing is, I'm saving all of these for when the government finally

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answers my letters," Little Boozy said. "I figure they got some kind of interest in the lizard-men, and I'm like an authority on the topic. Because I observe, you know? I pay attention." Little Boozy tapped himself on the temple with the flashlight. "Second thing is...."

He broke off and looked at Ken, a knowing grin on his face. What Ken initially thought was a wave of visceral horror washed over him. Then he fell over next to the table and during an indeterminate period of inspecting the debris washed up around the table's legs he realized that he was wasted. "Boozy, you motherfucker, you poisoned me," he said, and Little Boozy cracked up.

"Boo-yoom-fuck-poin'ee," Little Boozy mimicked. "Ah ha ha ha ha. That's great. Told you you were in for a treat."

The initial blast wave of the explosion in Ken's head passed, and he sat up. Something was moving in the darkness under the table. After intense examination he determined that it was his own shadow cast by the kerosene lantern. Except it wasn't. "Agh," Ken said, and scrambled backward away from the table, banging into the shelves opposite it. The jars set up a clanking racket, and he ducked his head waiting for a hail of glass and bits of lizard-man. No, not lizard-man. Ken willed himself not to adopt Little Boozy's terminology, lest he go from there to believing Little Boozy's ideas, which event didn't bear contemplation.

Still chuckling, Little Boozy said, "I may have gave you a little too much for your first time."

Ken could feel the jars hitting the back of his head, but worse than that he could feel the fluid flooding down his collar, feel the bits of not-lizard-man stuck in his hair, feel the toxins from the fluid creeping through his pores and into his capillaries and from there to his already reeling brain — which was, or at least part of it was, singing. Okay, he told himself. This isn't the first time you've tripped. Okay, it is the first time you've tripped on some kind of secretion from the mysterious critters that keep showing up squashed on US-12, but a trip is a trip. "Is a trip," he said.

"It sure is," Little Boozy said. "Business keeps up the way it is, I'm going to have to buy a bunker so's the big dealers from Detroit don't just take it away from me."

Ken suffered a vision of Big Boozy blasting away at a band of Detroit gangsters. Out of nowhere he had a nearly irresistible urge to get up and

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start jumping up and down. Overlapping this compulsion, like a bubble popping in his mind, the thought arose: so that's what the kids at the minigolf course are up to. He lifted his head, and was vaguely shocked to discover that he was dry and free of biological flotsam.

"They wouldn't know where to find the..." What was the word, Ken wondered. "Product," he finished.

"That's my ace in the hole," Little Boozy agreed.

Ken struggled to his feet, supporting himself on the shelves. The clanking of jars terrified him, but he held himself together. Little Boozy's voice had acquired color, mostly red, and Ken thought it smelled funny too, but that might have been just Boozy.

"But how — I mean, who drinks lizard-man roadkill, anyway?" he asked.

Sensing he had the upper hand, Little Boozy got expansive. "There's a story there," he said with as much bonhomie as a guy like him could muster. "My old man, you know, he grew up eating possum, skunk, turtle, whatever he could find, so one time when I had one of the more disfigured specimens in the house — left it on the kitchen table while I was in the can — he went and fried it up and ate the goddamn thing. Now that would have been okay, but then he took the parts he hadn't fried and used 'em for soup stock. We ate that soup, and I'm here to tell you I don't remember a thing else about that day. Was good soup, too."

This made Ken hungry. He was starting to get on top of the trip, in fact starting to like it. The edges weren't as hard as he remembered acid being, once you got through the first wave. All those kids pogoing up and down at the minigolf course, he thought. Little Boozy Boswell has 'em stoked on alien juice.

"I did some experimenting," Little Boozy went on, "and I found out that you don't have to cook anything. Fact, it's better if you don't. Lizard-man tea."

"If there's lizard-men at the bottom of Wamplers Lake," Ken said, "and they find out you've been using their friends and loved ones for tea, you might find some trouble."

"Let 'em try," Little Boozy said.

Infected by Little Boozy's bravado, Ken thought, Yeah, let 'em. Then he managed a moment of lucidity and concluded that one of the effects of

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lizard-man tea was a profound tendency to be suggestible. Even though he didn't believe in a city of lizard-men, he had a moment of stark terror at the thought of a wave of Reptilian (the part of his brain that had been singing what he now recognized as part of the same screwball ensemble piece favored by the kids at the minigolf course interrupted itself long enough to yowl *aaaaahhhhh! Reptilian!*) invaders from the weedy depths of Wamplers Lake. Or from the woods behind Mystery Hill, which was where Ken had found much of his own collection. Whoever the little critters really were, they tended to run afoul of the coyotes roaming around back there.

Any alien monsters who can't stay out of the way of coyotes and tourists on US-12 won't pose much of a threat, he thought. He was a little disappointed at the evaporation of his alien-invasion fantasy; it was more fun than imagining that they were just a bunch of bumblers with a certain illicit chemical usefulness.

"What do you charge for this, anyway?" he asked.

"Five dollars a jar," Little Boozy said. "I could go higher, but I read this book that said you shouldn't price yourself out of the market before you get brand recognition."

Ken's earlier conversations with Fara Oussemitski had been slowly steeping in the lizard-man tea, and now an idea occurred to him that was so preposterous he wrote it off as part of the hallucinogen. After all, when Little Boozy Boswell's voice was red and you almost ran screaming from the room because of a bunch of broken and seeping jars that were neither broken nor seeping, it was prudent to regard your intuition suspiciously. But—if gravity could be used to *talk* between universes, between branes, what if it could be used to *travel*? Yow, Ken thought. That's what the feds would be interested in. If the Pentagon got hold of this....

I have to talk to Fara, he thought.

"Boozy," he said. "You are a piss-poor human being to be selling this shit to kids."

Little Boozy shrugged. The action set off visible convection currents in the air around him, and the convection currents bent the notes in Ken's head, and he could have sworn that he was sliding sideways along the floor.

"I mean it," Ken said. "This is bullshit."

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"Whatever," Little Boozy said.

Ken went to the door. Wonder if I can drive, he thought. He entertained the idea of cruising US-12 until he saw Fara's van in a motel parking lot. Then he entertained the idea of being pulled over on US-12 and dealing with an annoyed state trooper who would know Ken was under the influence, but not of what. Recipe for a night in jail, he thought, and reluctantly came to the conclusion that if he could drive in a straight line, it ought to be back home.

"If you call the cops, I'm gonna burn your place down," Little Boozy said.

"Okay, Boozy," Ken said, and let the door bang shut behind him. The moonlight made him itchy, and the stars were moving in funny directions, but he found the truck, got the key in the ignition on the first try, and didn't even get stuck in the ditch turning around. Not bad, he thought. I can still handle it. Those old Sixties-honed reflexes never quite go away. He got home, found another beer in the fridge, and sipped it while he waited to come all the way down. The lizard-man tea — dammit, he told himself, stop calling it that — was a fast trip. Already he felt almost normal again, only with some ragged edges at the boundaries of his senses and that damn droning music in the back of his mind. The carbonation in the beer organized itself into a sort of percussion ensemble; Ken tapped his foot in time with it and thought that he wouldn't mind doing this again.

Also he wouldn't mind getting back in the truck and seeing where Fara was staying, partially just so he would know something she didn't know he knew. This was an impulse for payback, he knew, spawned by her sneaking around his place in the middle of the night. Argh, introspection. The camp whore that followed the army of intoxication. Ken chuckled to himself at his ridiculousness, and fell asleep, only to be awakened by a merciless hammering on the double-wide's door. Still on his couch, and still in his clothes, Ken shambled to the door and opened it to find Fara on the front step.

"Jesus Christ," he said, keenly aware that he looked like eight miles of bad road. She, on the other hand, looked like she was ready for a nightclub instead of a physics experiment. "What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty. I wanted to talk to you before you opened up."

He left the door open and went into the kitchen in search of coffee. She

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came in and followed him into the kitchen. There was no coffee, so Ken got a glass of water instead. "Want one?" he asked her.

Fara shook her head. She was wearing long spangly earrings that drew Ken's attention uncomfortably to the line of her throat. He drank off the glass of water and said, "Okay. What are we talking about?"

"Grammar," she said. "What if I told you that there really were alien beings communicating from another brane, and that I was starting to figure out what they were saying?"

Still feeling little aftershocks of the lizard-man tea, Ken had a hard time not telling Fara that Little Boozy Boswell was way ahead of her. He managed, though. She was rummaging through her bag looking for something, and Ken also had a hard time not saying something along the lines of *How about we have dinner sometime.* But he managed that, too. "Look," she said, coming up with a much-folded and -annotated sheet of paper. "These are the times when I've detected signals that I can understand. They're sending on a twenty-four-cycle, do you know what that means? Either they've heard something from us — which means someone out there is doing something veeeerrrrry secret — or *they've been here.*" Her eyes shone with the excitement of discovery.

I can't do it, Ken thought. She can't know about Little Boozy yet.

He could, however, show her his own collection. "Fara," he said. "You haven't, you know, snooped around any of the buildings here, have you?"

"Ken," she said. "I was here — am here — to do science. You afraid I'm going to steal your extra golf balls?"

"If you knew how much the colored ones cost, you might. Come on," Ken said. He found his shed key on top of the fridge. "Something you should see."

HE WAS A LITTLE AFRAID that she would be angry, or disbelieving, or scornful, or something, but Fara took one look at Ken's collection and said, "Oh. My. God. Fabulous."

There were nine of them. For most of the seven years since he'd seen the first, Ken had been feeling guilty about stuffing them, but now that he had Little Boozy as an ethical barometer, taxidermy seemed positively

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beneficent. He'd staged them in a couple of different ways, remembering museum trips as a kid when from one visit to the next, new information about dinosaurs or something would result in completely changed exhibits. So a couple of them were posed as if hunting, a couple standing upright, and in a fit of silliness he'd set two of them up on either side of a chessboard. "That's Boris and Bobby right there," he said as he pointed them out to Fara. She picked up one of the standing specimens and turned it over in her hands.

"How much did they weigh when you found them?" she asked.

"That one, not too much," Ken said. "Coyotes got to him. I had to do some reconstruction to make him look normal. Truth is, if that'd been the first one I found, I would have thought it was just pieces of an animal."

"Well, it was," Fara said. "Just the animal was from another dimension." Delighted with this idea, she laughed. Ken grinned with her. "What do you call this one?"

"Mary, because of Frankenstein."

Fara put Mary back on the shelf. "So what did the intact ones weigh?"

"Thirty, forty pounds. Wouldn't have figured that was the first question a physicist would ask."

"I've got others, believe me," Fara said. "But I'm curious about their weight because it helps me to ballpark what kind of energy they need to travel this way."

"So how much?"

"A lot. Did they have any tools, or machines, anything like that?"

Ken was shaking his head. "No, I always expected to find some, but they all turn up naked and dead. I've never seen a living one, and I've never seen a dead one with any kind of clothes or anything."

She picked up Bobby. "Amazing. Wonder what they're doing here."

"I don't know," Ken said. "It started maybe seven years ago, and I've seen a bunch of dead ones. A guy I know, Little Boozy — "

"You mentioned him yesterday."

Way to go, dope, Ken thought. "That's right, yeah. Well, Little Boozy sees 'em all the time run over on the road. These are the guys he thinks live at the bottom of Wamplers Lake."

"Actually, that's not any stranger than believing that they travel from other dimensions," Fara said, and although it pained Ken to admit it, she

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was right, which meant that except for the fact that he had a professor on his side, he and Little Boozy were in equal measure proponents of loony theories. Oh no, he thought. This contact with conspiracy nuts has finally done me in. Before you know it, I will not only believe in the Reptilian conspiracy, but at the same time I will start thinking Mystery Hill is a hoax. And then my transformation into a credulous idiot will be complete.

Fara was watching his face. "Something I said?" she asked.

"One of those moments when you realize something about yourself," Ken said. "In my experience those moments are almost always a mixed bag."

She put Bobby back on his side of the chessboard. "Yeah," she said.

"So okay," Ken said. "You told me about your grammar, I showed you my aliens from another dimension. What do we do now? Is this when the feds show up and disappear us both, or do we get to talk to them?"

"I'm thinking we should try to talk," Fara said. "I'm not quite sure it's going to work, though. Can you give me a hand with something?"

Usually Ken opened Mystery Hill at nine sharp, but what with the extraterrestrial hallucinogens and the possibility that he might be talking to aliens during the course of the morning, he decided to take the day off. While Fara wrestled with crates in the back of her car, he went down and chained off the driveway, hanging a CLOSED–SEE YOU TOMOROW! sign in the middle of the chain. He always spelled *tomorrow* wrong on the theory that if he made the place seem more rustic, tourists would be more likely to stop there. There was no draw quite like the chance to feel superior. Then he called Jamie and told her not to come in, which broke her heart not at all once he told her he'd pay her for the day. "Stay away from that shit Little Boozy is peddling," he told her. "If I ever see you pogoing on my minigolf course, we're going to have a problem."

"You're not my dad," she said, and hung up on him.

Glad that he'd never had kids, Ken walked out of the office to discover Old Vera of the Forked Tongue standing on the other side of the driveway chain. She appeared indignant.

"What do you mean, closed?" Vera demanded as soon as she saw him.

"You can read, Vera. Come back tomorrow."

"I most certainly will not." Vera commenced trying to heave one of her substantial thighs over the chain.

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Now what have I done to deserve this? Ken wondered, although he knew perfectly well. Twenty-five years ago, when he'd been more foolish and Vera more attractive, she had been one of his Reptilian-groupie liaisons. Now he was paying for his sins, because Vera of the Forked Tongue not only believed in the Reptilians, she professed to believe she was one. Hence her moniker. She appeared at Mystery Hill according to some schedule that made sense only to her, and every time she managed to fill Ken up with an emotional stew of regret, annoyance, and pity.

"Vera," he said. "If you fall down and break your arm, I'm not driving you to the hospital."

"Today's the day, Ken," Vera wheezed. "I finally figured it out."

Having no choice, Ken took hold of her leg just above the ankle and moved it back to the other side of the chain, careful not to upset her balance. When he let go of her leg, it stayed in the air for a moment before she shifted her weight. Remarkable balance for a woman of her size, Ken thought. He looked at her and wondered what it was about her life that had brought her to this pass. She was about his age, but since he'd first known her had put on maybe a hundred pounds and taken to dressing like Madame Blavatsky. Necklaces and bracelets rattled and clinked every time she moved or drew breath. Some of her hair was twisted into dreadlocks, some of the rest beaded and braided. Over her shoulder she carried a cloth bag stuffed with books and journals filled with ramblings and calculations about the Reptilians.

"What day?" he asked, because he couldn't help it.

"The day they show themselves," Vera said.

"Vera, you've said that a hundred times in the last twenty years. Literally," he said.

With great and withering hauteur, she said, "The scientific method demands great dedication, and progress through trial and error. I have had hypotheses, and they were wrong. I admit it. But now I am right, and I am coming over this chain, Ken Kassarjian, so you'd better just get used to the idea."

"No," he said. "We're closed today."

Vera looked as if he'd slapped her. Then her shock mutated into a knowing leer. "So it is today," she said. "That's why you're keeping everyone out. You *know*, don't you, Ken?"

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"Vera," Ken began, and then was briefly distracted as the lizard-man tea sparked up for a second and the entire Pink Floyd song "Vera" ran through his head. He looked up. It was in fact a sunny day. "Yikes," he muttered to himself.

"Ken, what the hell is wrong with you?"

He snapped himself out of it. "Nothing. Come back tomorrow."

"Ken, no, it's today. You owe me this, Ken."

He started walking away, not wanting to look at Vera because he knew she would get theatrical. "You owe me this, Ken!" she yelled. "If you know something, you owe me!"

"Tomorrow, Vera," he said without looking back. Feeling bad about himself, he walked back up the driveway and found Fara out behind the barn setting up a shiny metal contraption unlike the one he'd seen the day before.

"Who was that?" she asked.

"That," he said, "was Vera of the Forked Tongue. Did you see her?"

"I did. Are there many like her?"

"Too many. But she and I have a history, so she feels entitled." As soon as the words left his mouth, he wanted to kill himself.

"A history," Fara repeated, with a sidelong look and the faintest hint of a smile.

Ah well, Ken thought. Honesty's the best policy. "I've been around long enough that I had lots of chances to do dumb things. Couldn't pass all of them up."

"Persuasive," she said, and went back to her machine.

Time to change the subject, Ken thought. "What do you call this thing?"

"This thing is a Lacoste A10. For measuring fluctuations in gravity. I've also," she added with a wink, "customized it a little."

"Fancy," Ken said. "Lacoste like the shirts?" He was having a hard time imagining Izod gravimeters.

Fara laughed. "No, but one of my colleagues did paint an alligator on the side of his. I've got a bunch of other basic mass-spring doodads in the van, but I like this one," Fara said.

"So, customized. As in, talking to them?"

She was fiddling with a display. "That's the idea."

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"Huh," Ken said. "Now when you do this, is it going to come across as fluctuations in the gravity over there?"

"I hope so. But gravity might not do over there what it does here. Physical laws might be different. Although," Fara said, looking off into the distance for a moment, "if they can exist here, things must not be all that different there. Unless some kind of conservation of, what, form, is operating. Wow."

"You lost me."

"Well, what if they occupy a certain ecological space over there, and they are more or less reconstituted to occupy the analogous space here? What if there's a sort of universal trans-brane grammar of phylogeny, so that if you're...." She caught herself, which was a good thing, because Ken never would have caught her. "Never mind. Probably things are just similar enough over there that they can survive here."

"They don't actually survive too well," Ken pointed out.

"This is maybe not the time to tell you this," Fara said as she sighted down a thin tube pointed in the direction of the barn, "but absence of evidence is not, as they say, evidence of absence. Could be there's a million of them running around in the woods and you and Boozy have just seen the ones that didn't make it. Could be they wanted you to do everything you've done, et cetera. Or not. I don't know, and you don't either."

"Okay, Professor," Ken said.

She looked up at him. "What?"

He was annoyed but couldn't say exactly why, because she was probably right, or at any rate could be right. Still, there were ways to say something, and he'd been seeing the dead lizard-men for years. Maybe she was just trying to get his goat because of Vera.

"Nothing," he said. "If you talk to them, ask them if they'll tell us how to come over there for a visit. But only if we get some kind of survival course first. I don't want to visit another universe if I'm just going to get hit by a car full of alien tourists. Also ask them why they don't have any clothes on."

"If the connection works," she said, "you can ask them yourself."

She plugged her laptop into a socket on the side of the Lacoste, turned both machines on, and started running three or four different programs. "Okay, here goes," she said after a minute. It occurred to Ken that he still hadn't had any coffee. There wasn't any place close enough to walk.

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Maybe Jamie would bring him a cup. He was about to unlock the office and use the phone in there when he remembered that she wasn't coming in. Then he was about to ask Fara if she wanted a cup, but before he could, she said, "Hey, it worked."

"What? What worked?"

"This worked. This talking-to-another-universe thing we've been doing."

Ken experienced that dangerously polyvalent kind of exasperation that you only feel toward someone you either a) love or b) like a lot in a way that in unguarded moments you might admit means you want to love. He was dangerously near to needing saving, and not from a tourist-trap groupie this time. Fara Oussemitski was a creature of another...well, phylum, he thought, since the word was in his head. Phylogeny? Phylum? They were related, right?

"You serious?" he said.

"I sure am." She was toggling back and forth between a couple of different programs on her laptop.

"Well, holy sheepshit, Doctor Oussemitski. I guess congratulations are in order."

"You guess right. Hey, Ken, run into the barn and see how far off your plumb bob hangs."

He did, a little goofy because she'd called him Ken. Here you are participating in a communication with an alien race, he thought, laughing at himself, and you're all calf-eyed over this girl. The plumb bob was hanging fourteen degrees off. "Yow," he said, and went back outside to make his report.

"And the average is what?"

"About eight degrees."

"Yeah," she said, eyes still on the monitor of her laptop. "Whole lot of chatter all of a sudden." Then she sat up straighter and said, "I'm such an idiot."

Ken did his best to look doubtful.

"Which way is the plumb bob off? I mean, what direction?"

Closing his eyes to envision the inside of the barn, Ken oriented himself and pointed to the south-southwest. "About there," he said. When he opened his eyes he gave himself a fright because he was pointing

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right at the shed, and momentarily he thought that the shed door was going to burst open and disgorge a horde of avenging lizard-men. Hey, fellas, he was already explaining in his mind. I didn't kill 'em (well, there was that one last October, but I thought it was a turkey), and if you want something to get good and worked up about, have I introduced you to my neighbor and distant acquaintance Little Boozy Boswell?

"What's over that way?" Fara asked. "Other than the shed. I'm guessing if they were coming into the shed, you'd have had communication with them already."

"I was just thinking that," Ken said. "All's that's out there is woods. A creek or two, couple of ponds. Farther back there's some houses."

She looked skeptical. "Let's take a walk," she said.

"Are you...wait a sec. You think that when the plumb bob is off more it means some of them are coming over?" It made a certain kind of sense.

Fara was already headed around the shed and into the brushy margin of Ken's property. "That's exactly what I'm saying," she said over her shoulder. "I think that your baseline disturbance is just noise from the open channel. Small fluctuations probably mean some kind of communication, and big ones signal arrivals or departures. Argh, I wish there was some way to monitor that plumb bob so we could know how long the big disturbances go on."

"Get your department to put in a camera," Ken suggested.

"Sure, but I mean right now. If we see some of them, and we can correlate the last arrival with the end of the big disturbance, then — agh." Not looking where she was going, she'd walked into a low-hanging branch. She stumbled, and Ken caught her.

"Tenure," she said. "If I can make that correlation, I get tenure."

Ken couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. "Tenure?"

She shook her head and rubbed at the spot on her hairline where she'd hit the branch. "Oh. Did I not say the part about the Nobel Prize and becoming an international celebrity for discovering sapient life in another universe? Thought I did. Hey, we have to hurry." She took off through the trees, and Ken followed.

Truth be told, the moment at which Ken Kassarjian first observed the presence of a living sapient extraterrestrial organism was a little

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anticlimactic. He was out of breath, his mind was scattered by his infatuation with Fara Oussemitski, and he'd just slapped at a mosquito behind his right ear. Then Fara stopped dead in front of him and he almost barreled into her while simultaneously trying to get a look at whatever had caught her attention. Which, as it turned out, was a lizard-man. Then another. Then two more.

Well, I'll be darned, Ken thought — but he was also thinking that this proximity to Fara was mighty nice, and that the combination of bug dope and whatever she put in her hair smelled better than it had any right to.

"Shit," Fara said. "I don't have my camera."

It was all Ken could do not to burst out laughing. Some remnant instinct toward woodland silence, left over from his teenage years when he hunted a lot, kept him quiet, but Fara looked over her shoulder at him, saw the expression on his face, and said, "Shut up."

The lizard-men heard her and stood looking at the two of them. One of them said something to the others. Its voice sounded a little like R2D2. Then all four of them were off like they were spring-loaded, scattering into the trees.

"Some alien hunter you are," Ken said.

"I'm a *physicist*," she replied with wounded dignity, and stalked off in the general direction of the minigolf course. As Ken turned to follow her, he saw out of the corner of his eye the unmistakable form of Little Boozy Boswell, motionless in the dappled shadow of young pine trees growing up in the clearing made by the fall of their ancestors. All of his exuberance, his flirtatious happiness at being alive this morning, drained right out through his gut. Keeping a stone face so Boozy wouldn't think he'd been spotted, Ken walked off, but already he was dreading what he knew would come next.

And it didn't take long. The next morning, while Fara was off somewhere compiling the results of the previous day's soon-to-be-immortal endeavors, and Ken was sitting in the office counting up receipts and having a cup of coffee, he heard the signature death rattle of Little Boozy's F-150. "Hey there, Ken," Little Boozy said as he burst through the office door. "I got me an idea."

"Does it involve gangsters?"

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"Does it what?" Ken watched the wheels grinding in Little Boozy's head. "No, I got an idea. What if, and I'm not saying this is true, but what if we could find out where the lizard-men were coming from?"

"And how would we do that?" Ken asked.

Little Boozy glared at him. I know I shouldn't, Ken thought. I'll go to hell for it. But it's just too much fun.

Plus there was way too much at stake. Who knew how the lizard-men would react if Little Boozy wanted to start trapping them, or ranching them or something?

"Well," Little Boozy said irritably. "What's that professor been doing? Ain't she looking for them?"

"Boozy, you know as well as I do that a hundred people a year show up looking for aliens. Old Vera of the Forked Tongue showed up again today. So as far as the professor is concerned, she might be. She hasn't told me much. Why don't you go ask her yourself?"

As he heard himself say this, Ken realized it might be a serious tactical error. He hadn't told Fara about Little Boozy's surveillance, and he had no idea how she would react to Little Boozy if he approached her in a belligerent mood.

"I just might do that," Little Boozy said, but Ken could tell he was vamping. Boozy knew Ken was lying, but he didn't know that Ken knew he knew, and he didn't know that Ken knew that Little Boozy was trying to sucker him. I'm no genius, Ken thought, but all it takes is the right frame of reference to make me look like one.

"Okay," he said. "You go right ahead."

Little Boozy thought of something. "Hey, Ken," he said, as if he'd just walked in and they were starting a brand-new conversation. "How far back does your property go that way?" He pointed past the shed.

"Couple of miles," Ken said, lying through his teeth. In fact his land ended less than three hundred yards from Michigan Avenue, and beyond that there was forest owned by some millionaire somewhere who hadn't gotten around to selling it off for second homes. The lizard-men were appearing on the millionaire's land, but Ken thought it best to keep Little Boozy vague on that fact.

"Huh. Like out past the pond where them beavers used to be?"

"It's not a pond anymore," Ken said. One of Big Boozy's last excursions

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beyond his property line had been a mission last fall to dynamite the beaver dam that flooded a part of an old road back in the woods. Since this road was Big Boozy's preferred route to his favorite spot to shine deer, he saw the beavers as mortal enemies. Ken hoped that someday beavers would learn how to use dynamite and get annoyed at the presence of Big Boozy's shack.

"Well, that's the place I mean," Little Boozy said. "Is that on your land?"

"Boozy, I'm not going to sue your dad for trespassing so he could blow up some beavers," Ken said.

"I ain't worried about that," Little Boozy said.

Suddenly fatigued by the whole conversation, Ken considered whether he could make trouble for either of the Boswells, or with any luck both, by getting the state Department of Natural Resources interested in the Boozy Beaver Massacre. It seemed like too much trouble, plus he could only imagine what would happen if the DNR ran across the lizard-men.

"Boozy," he said. "What are we talking about here?"

"We're talking about your professor," Boozy said.

"She's not mine," Ken said, and he must not have done a good enough job of keeping the wistful tone out of his voice, because Boozy's jaw dropped open — a sight guaranteed to provoke avarice among dentists and nausea in just about anyone else — and his eyes got squinty with malicious glee.

"You got a thing for the professor," he said slowly, savoring each word like a kid newly in possession of a devastating secret about his worst playground enemy.

"Screw," Ken said.

"Ha," Boozy said. "I knew it. We'll talk about this later."

He bulldozed his way out of Ken's office, leaving Ken to curse his lack of a poker face. If only I hadn't spent my last twenty-five years at the mercy of the Veras of the world, Ken thought. I'd be stronger. I sure as hell wouldn't have to suffer the indignity of having Little Boozy Boswell gloat about me having a schoolboy crush on a physics professor.

Who, Ken knew, would take off to Ann Arbor or wherever she came from as soon as she got her readings. He cursed himself for a sentimental fool. Then he cursed himself some more because while he was thinking

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about being a sentimental fool, he grew besotted by the specter of her smile at him while they were out on the lake, and whatever resolve he might have been about to muster went poof! Just like that.

"Fara Oussemitski," he said out loud. He liked the sound of it.

IT WAS A SLOW DAY at Mystery Hill. The only paying customer after two o'clock was Vera of the Forked Tongue, who stationed herself next to the barn and started taking some kind of reading with a sextant. After he'd satisfied himself that she wasn't going to cause any trouble, Ken whiled away the afternoon replacing the Astroturf on the seventeenth hole, where the local teenagers liked to dance out their lizard-man tea affliction. He'd lifted the new patch of Astroturf from the back porch of a cabin just beyond his property line to the south, thinking all the while that he was going to go to hell for the theft but also that life was not going to offer him many chances to perplex absentee millionaires, so what the heck.

He was rolling a wrinkle out of the patch and cursing the teenagers, as well as cursing Little Boozy for addicting them to his interdimensional devil juice, when the possibility presented itself that the teenagers could actually talk to the lizard-men. I mean, his train of thought went, if they're in tune with something while they're on the juice, maybe they're in tune all the way. The idea made him wish he'd seen a lizard-man while he had been on his own tea-trip. Maybe they could have conversed, and Ken could have warned them to stay away from Little Boozy lest they be turned into ranch animals in a dimension not their own. Wasn't the whole point of Timothy Leary's existence to convince people that hallucinogens would put them in touch with other realities?

Ken willed himself to be rational. Then he reasoned that the only way to find out what went through the teenagers' heads while they were tea-tripping was to ask them, which made him an accessory after the fact in Little Boozy's substantial contribution to the delinquency of local minors and thereby put his livelihood and freedom to walk the streets in jeopardy.

On the other hand, if there was any kernel of truth in this deranged idea, it might keep Fara around a bit longer. His heart did a little flip at the thought.

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It was a desperate time. Ken went looking for Jamie and found her sneaking a cigarette behind the barn. "Huh. Some things never change, I guess," he said.

"Shit," Jamie said. "Don't tell my parents, Ken." Her worry, however, did not provoke her to such a drastic action as extinguishing the cigarette.

"Your personal relationship with cancer isn't my business," Ken said. "I'm here to ask you a crazy question."

"Ken, if you hit on me, my dad is going to kick your ass."

For just a second, Ken had the feeling that he wasn't quite free of the lizard-man tea. "What do you take me for?"

"You weren't going to hit on me? Shit." Jamie flung her cigarette to the ground and stomped on it.

Teenagers, Ken thought. He was glad he didn't have kids.

"Jamie," he said, "you are the loveliest piece of untouchable jailbait in all of the Irish Hills, kiddo. Now tell me something: you ever join in with all of the kids who drink up Boozy's juice?"

"What if I did?"

"If you did, I have a question."

"What if I didn't?"

"Then I still have a question, but I need to ask it to someone else. Either way, I need your help."

"You can't make me do anything just because you caught me smoking. I'll tell my dad you hit on me."

"Okay, and then he'll kick my ass. Fine. You don't want to tell me, that's fine. Who should I talk to?"

Armed with the name and location of one Travis Ludwig, Ken coaxed the F-150 to life and roared off to a bait shop way the hell off the other side of the lake. He found a kid matching Travis's description counting leaf worms into plastic containers that had once held chip dip. It being midafternoon, when all of the fish in the local lakes were hiding out, Ken figured that his conversation with Travis would be uninhibited by the presence of customers.

"You Travis Ludwig?" he asked.

Travis nodded. "Don't make me lose count."

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Ken waited until Travis had finished the container he was working on. "You know Jamie, who works over at my place?"

"What's your place?"

"Mystery Hill."

Travis looked up at him. "That's your place? Your minigolf course sucks, man. And the whole gravity thing is a total scam. I can't believe the cops don't shut you down."

For the second time in less than an hour, Ken blessed the good fortune that had made him childless. "We're getting off on the wrong foot here, kid. Do you know Jamie?"

Travis sucked on his lip ring. "Yeah."

"Okay. She asked me to ask you about a little something you might get from Little Boozy Boswell."

Smelling profit, Travis brightened. "Sure, man. What do you need?"

"I need to know about the juice. You know where it comes from?"

"You just said Boozy. I know all about entrapment, man." Travis turned away and started counting worms again. Ken waited with superhuman patience until the magic number of twenty was achieved.

"Okay, Travis. I'll cut this short. What do you know about the lizard-men?"

With exaggerated care, Travis filled the plastic container with dirt and pressed the lid down, working his thumbs around its circumference as if he'd been specially warned about the perils of escaping leaf worms. When he was done, he put the container on top of its stack in the cooler, next to the Home-Made Ham Salad Sandwiches.

"I know exactly shit about lizard-men," he said, but he wouldn't look Ken in the eye.

"Travis," Ken said. "I am here because of a woman. You understand that if I can't count on you to help me out a little, the consequences to my emotional well-being might result in you being a little gimpy the next time you want to dance around on my seventeenth green."

"You threatening me?" Before Ken could answer, Travis whipped a butterfly knife out of his pocket and started to do something complicated with it. Ken took a step forward and snapped Travis's head back with a straight right to the nose. The butterfly knife fluttered out of Travis's hand into a box full of cigarette cartons. Travis himself fluttered down to the

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floor, holding his nose. On the way down he banged into a wire display, bringing down a rain of bobbers and sinkers on his head.

Ken stood looking down at him. He felt bad. "Kid," he said, "I shouldn't have hit you. But don't ever pull a knife on somebody when you don't know what you're doing with it."

"You broke my nose," Travis said through his cupped hands.

"Nah," Ken said. "I didn't hit you that hard." He found the knife and put it in his pocket.

"That's mine," Travis said.

"You can pick it up at the bottom of the lake. Now tell me about the lizard-men. You see them when you're on the juice?"

Travis moved his hands far enough from his face to see that he was only bleeding from one nostril, and not very much. He wiped his fingers on his shirt and said, "Yeah."

"You talk to them?"

"It's not really talking." Travis shrugged. "More like singing."

"So I've noticed," Ken said, thinking of his seventeenth green. "So what's it like?"

"I don't know," Travis said. "It's cool."

Ken was on the verge of socking him in the nose again when the front door banged open and admitted a fat, sunburned fisherman. "You carry chubs?" he wanted to know.

"We're all out," Ken said, hauling Travis to his feet.

"Damn." The fisherman wandered to the back of the store to consult *Field & Stream*.

"We're not out of chubs," Travis said. The rattle of the aerator that kept the chubs and minnows alive in an aluminum tub kept the fisherman from hearing.

"Travis," Ken said. "Tell me what the lizard-men say."

Again Travis shrugged. "It's sort of an invitation, I guess," Travis said. "But it's not like they're real. That's just the trip."

Good, Ken thought. Perfect. Exactly what I want you to believe.

"How do you think you might take them up on the invitation?"

"You're an asshole," Travis said.

"What I am is a desperate man, Travis," Ken said. "Do I have to repeat myself?"

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The fisherman was meanwhile sticking a package of beef jerky in the pocket of his vest. Travis didn't notice, but Ken did. "Buddy," he said, "you need to put that back and get out."

"I'll pay for it," the fisherman said. He looked annoyed, and Ken thought, what is it with people? Catch kids smoking, they want to cry rape. Catch grown men stealing beef jerky, they act like you're an IRS auditor.

"What would you say if I told you that aliens use gravity to communicate with our dimension?" he asked the fisherman.

Wordlessly, and with bomb-squad care, the fisherman put the beef jerky on the counter and left, never taking his eyes off Ken.

"Now," Ken said. "We're alone again. Do I have to repeat my question?"

Travis thought hard. "Actually, yeah. I kind of forgot what it was. What did you say about gravity?"

"Ask your science teacher," Ken said. Out of the blue he was riding a wave of crazed elation, the kind of delirious pride that comes from knowing something that nobody else in the world knew — only in this case Fara knew, so it was only the two of them. That made it even better. They shared this knowledge. Ken imagined sitting on the patio of a Wamplers Lake cabin with Fara, sharing a bottle of wine and reminiscing about the time they'd discovered alien life in other dimensions. Those were the days, huh?

He shook himself out of it. "Do you think you could actually go there?" he asked Travis...who, predictably, shrugged again.

"That's what they say," he said.

"Anybody you know done it?"

"No." Travis shook his head. "You have to be in a group to...what, make it work."

"Make what work?"

"The singing."

Ah. That, Ken thought, explained why he hadn't gotten an invitation the night out at Little Boozy's.

"So when all of you get zonked on lizard-man tea and go dancing around on my seventeenth green, you talk to the lizard-men and they invite you for a visit."

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Travis's face went slack. "Lizard-man tea?"

"Yeah, kid." Lord save me, Ken thought. I should not be enjoying this nearly so much. "What do you think Boozy makes that stuff from?"

One hand up as if to ward off Ken's words, or Ken himself, Travis went back around behind the counter. "I'm gonna puke," he said. But he didn't puke. He started counting mealworms again, slow and steady, one through twenty. Ken stood watching him until he'd finished one little tub. Then he decided that, having taken one fairly drastic action in assaulting a teenager, he might as well take one more.

"Travis," he said. "You got any?"

THREE HOURS LATER, he said to Fara, "I think I have something figured out."

He had taken her to dinner at the Zukey Lake Tavern, which was a long drive from the Irish Hills but worth it both for the company and for the distance it put between them and Little Boozy, of whom Ken was at that moment ready to believe the worst. Also they'd driven past the speedway at Brooklyn, which was where Ken discovered to his perplexity that Fara was a NASCAR fan. And not just the kind of fan who put a #8 sticker in the rear window of her car, oh no. She talked his ear off, unbidden, about the complexities of a recent race at Pocono during the course of which Mark Martin would have won had he not forgotten that Turn 3 was slippery because of a crash thirty laps previous...and so on, and so on. Ken lost track. He wasn't into sports. But he was very into Fara, the way she lit up when she talked about something that interested her. He'd never known a woman who could suddenly luminesce when talking about either string theory or stock-car racing.

"Anyway," she said when she'd run out of steam on the NASCAR topic, "what did you figure out?"

"I think I figured out how we can get Boozy off our backs and still win you your Nobel Prize," he said.

"Boozy?" She looked puzzled. "What's Boozy got to do with anything?"

This was one of those moments when the only way out was straight through. "He saw us back by the pond," Ken said. "I didn't want to tell you, but...well, here's the thing. He's been making the lizard-men into a kind of drink."

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"Drink?"

"Yeah, it's...." Hm, Ken thought. How to do this. Okay. "Little Boozy Boswell comes from a long line of bootleggers. Don't ask me how this happened, but one day his old man...."

"Big Boozy," Fara submitted, just to let him know she was still following.

"Right," I said. "Big Boozy ran over a lizard-man and thought it was a turtle or something, and he cooked it. He's kind of crazy. So they ate the soup, and the way Little Boozy tells it, there's no trip like it. Not 'shrooms, peyote, nothing."

Fara cocked her head to the side. "Ken Kassarjian," she said, "just how much do you know about trips?"

"Relaying information, darling," Ken said. "I am purely a conduit here."

"Darling," she commented, and sipped her drink.

It took the very last of Ken's self-control to not pursue that comment. "So the kids who have been tearing up my minigolf course say that you can talk to the lizard-men if you're, you know," he said, "in tune. But you need more than one person to do it."

"How do the kids get it?" As she said it, Fara's entire upper body quaked in a shiver that had to be exaggerated for effect. "I mean, is Boozy — Little Boozy — ?"

"Yeah, he is," I said.

"That son of a bitch," Fara said.

"Agreed. So tell me again how this gravity thing works."

Fara pursed her lips. She had one of those perfect Cupid's-bow mouths, designed to be pursed at the transparent ruses of inferior beings such as men. "Ken, you are playing dumb. Do you think women go for that?"

"I think I am at the Zukey Lake Tavern with a marvelous girl who is going to make her own decisions," Ken said. "And perhaps that is as far as it should go."

"Mm hm," Fara said, and absently spun the stud in her lip. Their dinners arrived, and Ken tore into his chicken fried steak while Fara — here, Ken thought, was his riposte to her infuriatingly accurate insights into his own personality — went to great lengths to pretend that she wasn't picking around her Caesar salad because she didn't like it.

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"Gravity," Ken said, just to see if it would work.

"You asshole," she said. "You know the whole thing. I already explained it to you."

Ken sighed. "I can see I'm going to have to do all the hard work here," he said. "Okay. Gravity fluctuations are really communications from another brane. Brane?"

"Right."

"Right. So my place is one of the ones where the communications come through, which is why Little Boozy has all of these roadkill lizard-men, and God knows where else or how else he's gotten them, to make his tea."

"Right."

"And the kids say that the lizard-men are inviting them somewhere."

"Right. What?"

"Yeah, that's what this kid says. But it only works in groups." Ken caught himself waving his fork around with a piece of steak still attached and shedding bits of batter. He set it on his plate. "This is the good part. If they can come through, maybe we can, too. Maybe my place — "

"I cannot believe this," Fara said. "Here I am trying to do science, and I have to deal with a drug dealer named Little Boozy who is cooking the bodies of aliens to make hallucinogens for the local teenagers. Not to mention Reptilian conspiracy theorists."

"Steeping, more like. I don't think he really cooks them, except for that first time." Ken let pass her remark about Vera. No way was he having that conversation...although it did occur to him to wonder where Vera had gotten to. She might not be the type to climb over chains, but she also wasn't the type to go easily when she thought she was on the trail of galactic secrets. Which was all the time.

"Well, he's innovative, Little Boozy, isn't he?" Fara forced herself to take a bite of the salad. "Listen, if we can really communicate with them, I mean directly, without using the gravimeter, how are we supposed to explain what he's doing?"

"I wondered about that myself," Ken said. "Maybe when we take them up on their invitation, we can ask."

At slightly after two o'clock in the morning, butterflies in his stomach, Ken was watching Fara tinker with her Izod gravity gizmo out

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in the woods where they'd seen the lizard-men. So, he was thinking. Guess we're going to do it. "You never did tell me what you said to them," he said.

She wasn't listening. "Hmm?"

"When you were trying to talk to them," Ken prompted. "What did you say?"

"Oh, yeah. I just sent a test message. Quick brown fox type of thing."

"Okay, but was it actual words, or are you saying it that way because you don't think I'll understand what you really did?"

Fara stood and turned to him. "Ken. I'm really not always trying to be patronizing. Okay?"

"Fine," he said. "So was it actual words?"

She sighed. "Yes. Kind of. I made a guess at how their messages might be structured, and sent something back with a similar structure. For all I know, it came across as a haiku."

"That's all you needed to say, Professor."

"You are an exasperating man," Fara said, and went back to her tinkering. Ken stood feeling awkward until she was done. Then it was Go Time. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the bottle he'd bought from Travis.

"Are just the two of us going to be enough?" he asked her.

"How should I know?"

Ken opened the bottle, which had once held maple syrup and now held about two inches of lizard-man tea. "Here's mud in your eye," he said, and drank. He held it out to Fara, and she killed off what was left.

"Do we dance now?" she asked.

"How should I know?"

Fara gave him a look and tapped something into the keyboard attached to the gravimeter. "Okay," she said. "Take us to your leaders."

A tremor crept up Ken's left leg. He looked down at it and watched as his foot started to tap. "Hoo boy," he said. "Stuff works fast." An old *Saturday Night Live* sketch with Steve Martin ran through his head. The lizard-man tea scoured its way through his brain, and he started to hear chirps and whistles, like whalesong or R2D2. He caught Fara's eye, and then caught her hand, and just like that they were pogoing. Her eyes shone in the dark, and Ken wanted to sing but didn't know the words. His mouth

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came open anyway, and sound came out, and for a second the sound blinded him and he felt like he was sensing something, physically sensing something, that wasn't coming via taste/touch/smell/sound/sight. Someone took his other hand, and Ken tried to look at who it was, but he couldn't make his eyes work — a lizard-man? Would they dance together? The hand felt bigger than that, but there was no trusting sensation at this point. A third voice joined in, and deep inside the hallucinatory fog shrouding Ken's brain, realization sparked: Vera of the Forked Tongue. Oh shit, he thought. She found us. Still he couldn't make his eyes work, and then he figured out the trick. They were closed, that was it, and all he had to do was open them, and that's when he saw not just Vera of the Forked Tongue but Little Boozy Boswell, the four of them pogoing in a ring, like they were dancing around an interdimensional maypole. The music filled him with longing, and Ken understood that as they sang, he and Fara and Little Boozy and Vera were all saying yes.

I've been had, Ken thought. Vera and Little Boozy had it all figured out, and now that I've got my eyes open I'm stuck watching the two of them jump up and down. He tried to look at Fara instead, but found that he could no longer control his head. The world swirled, and Ken felt his body start to come apart. He looked around, but it took him a long time to turn his head as time started to elongate; then in a rush the bark fell off all of the trees and their leaves turned into embers flitting up away from the fire burning in the center of the circle made by their four bodies. The music was too loud to hear, and they were still saying yes.

There was a crackling sound inside Ken's head, akin to what he'd heard the last time he'd yawned while he had a sinus infection. The four of them, hand in hand in hand in hand, jumped up and came down, jumped up and came down. Jumped up.

THE FIRST THING that happened in the lizard-men's dimension, or universe or whatever it was, was that Ken's ears popped. Then he looked around, and what he saw convinced him that God, if there was such a being, was more of a prankster than anyone had guessed.

He dropped Vera's hand but held onto Fara's, and she let him. "Unbelievable," she said.

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It was hot and sunny, the sun brighter and whiter than back home. There was something like grass under Ken's feet, and things like trees growing around them, and water in a pond off to their left. It must have been autumn, because most of the leaves had fallen off the trees, and through their naked branches Ken could see the outlines of structures. He knew what they were for because he'd spent the last thirty-three years in one.

"A tourist trap," he said.

On the side of one of the buildings was a colorful banner, and a lizard-man sat on a stool taking tickets from a lizard-man family. A little farther away was some kind of gaming area; maybe lizard-men hadn't discovered minigolf yet, but they had something like it. Ken wondered what it was, and had the thought that he might just make his fortune if he could figure it out and bring it back to Earth: PLAY THE GAME THE ALIENS PLAY!!! What a banner that would make out on US-12.

Everything was at lizard-man scale, and Ken felt unwieldy, as if he might break something the minute he moved. A tiny silver airplane flew overhead. As he worked through the logic of what he was seeing, Ken got a sudden chill. Leaning his head close to Fara's, he said, "You think they have a shed like mine?"

She looked at him. "I don't know," she said. "Has anyone ever come through before?"

"Maybe it's been just the one way," he said. "Hell, maybe it's like extreme tourism. Experience the dangers of another dimension, as soon as you sign this liability waiver."

Fara laughed. "Litigious aliens," she said.

Her equanimity amazed him, and he was about to tell her so, but just then a shriek of exaltation escaped Vera of the Forked Tongue. "Glory be!" she screamed, and fell to her knees. What a time this must be for her, Ken thought. Turns out that after all this time of everyone telling her she was nuts, me included, she was onto something. Little Boozy's reaction was a bit different. He took one look around, turned to Ken, and said, "We need to get the hell out of here."

When Ken saw what Boozy had seen, he thought that Boozy was exactly right. A group of lizard-men, carrying what appeared to be weapons, came trooping out of the woods in their direction.

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"You and your conservation of form," Ken said to Fara. "Your grammar of phylogeny."

"I didn't invent it," she said.

"Wonder if they're going to steep us," Ken said. Little Boozy took off running, and one of the lizard-men raised its weapon and shot him. He sprawled on the grass, rolled over onto his back, and started foaming at the mouth. A small black dart stuck out of the side of his neck.

"Uh oh," Ken said. He was sweating, and could already feel the beginnings of a sunburn on the back of his neck. Vera was still on her knees, and had begun to babble in some language Ken didn't recognize. Maybe it came from one of her books on how to talk to Reptilians. The group of lizard-men stopped about ten feet from the three humans and fanned out into a semicircle.

"So, listen," Ken said to Fara, keeping his voice low. "You think we're here because of your gravity doodad or because of the tea?"

She shrugged. "I'm not going to speculate on metaphysics. My guess is the Lacoste did it."

"So we can go back?"

"I don't know," she said. "We haven't tried."

Vera of the Forked Tongue switched to English. "I am one of you," she said to the lizard-men, adding an elaborate pantomime that looked to Ken like some kind of interpretive dance. "One of you, don't you understand? I just can't change back."

One of the lizard-men came up to Ken. It stood about waist-high to him, but nothing about its posture indicated a trace of wariness. Looking back and forth between him and Fara, it made some kind of decision. It coughed and said, "Took you long enough."

I'll be damned, Ken thought. He kept his mouth shut, though, because the lizard-man was talking to Fara.

"It's not every day you invent a way to manipulate gravity to travel to another brane," Fara said, a trifle defensively. Ken at first heard her last word as *brain*, and spent some time wondering if she was saying they were just hallucinating the whole thing before he got himself back on track. "Have you been watching me?" she asked.

The lizard-man nodded. Then it looked at Ken and said, "The chessboard — is that what you call it, chessboard?"

Ken's throat was too dry for him to speak, so he nodded.

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"Funny," the lizard-man said. Its inflection was so flat that he couldn't tell if it was joking.

"How did you learn English?" Fara asked it.

"Observation."

Ken swallowed three or four times, trying to find his voice. "Do you...what is this?" he asked. "Do you run tours or something?"

The lizard-man ignored him. It was looking over at Little Boozy, who was starting to shake off the effects of whatever they'd darted him with. "His jars are not funny," it said.

Boozy, Ken thought, you're a walking dead man.

"I never did that," he said.

Again the lizard-man ignored what he'd said. It was looking at Vera, who, still on her knees, had approached it. "I am one of you," she said. The lizard-man looked up at Fara.

"Can you explain this?" it asked.

Fara inclined her head toward Ken. "He can."

The lizard-man looked at Ken, and he said, "Um. Well, she...there's people who believe that people like you have been coming to Earth for a long time. And you can change shapes and look like our people, humans. She believes that, and she thinks she's one of you who can't change her shape back."

The lizard-man kept its gaze on Ken. It didn't say anything.

"I know," he said. "It sounds crazy to me, too."

Some kind of cheer, a storm of whistles and chirps, rose up from the gaming area. "What is that game, anyway?" Ken asked.

The lizard-man walked away. Vera shuffled after it on her knees, still professing her true Reptilian form. "Now might be a good time to see if we can get back," Ken said to Fara.

"Yeah," she said. "I have data to get back to."

Data, Ken thought.

The lizard-man returned. "There is some difficulty," it said, and pointed at Little Boozy. "That one has committed crimes."

"That's what I always told him," Ken said.

"He will stay here," the lizard-man said.

There was a silence. Ken imagined Little Boozy trussed up on a lizard-man table with an apple in his mouth. Man, he thought. I should do something. Boozy's a bastard, but he doesn't deserve to be eaten.

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"Business has been slow," the lizard-man said.

Ken opened his mouth, shut it again, opened it again. "You're going to exhibit him?"

"And this one," the lizard-man said, pointing at Vera, who had gone back to speaking in tongues. "You will exchange the two of them for going home."

"Well, listen," Ken said. "You get two of us, man, you're going to triple your receipts in no time. How about some kind of exchange, you know? I can build something on the side of the barn, you can show us humans what that game is. How about it?" What he really wanted was the game. Real live lizard-men would be way too much trouble; Ken had briefly tried adding a petting zoo to Mystery Hill, but it had ended badly.

"You will exchange the two of them for going home," the lizard-man repeated.

"Come on, at least tell me about the game," Ken said.

Fara, who had been staring at him in disbelief during his previous sales pitch, now hauled off and slapped him on the back of the head. "Ken," she said in a heated whisper, "Vera wants to stay and Boozy's a murderer. Do not negotiate."

"Okay, fine," he said, spreading his hands. "Fine."

Whereupon Fara turned on her biggest movie-star smile and said, "Do you mind if I ask you a question or two about how you travel? I'm still getting some of the bugs worked out."

The lizard-man just looked at her. So did Ken. Little Boozy had gotten to his feet. He swayed and said, "Man, if I could bottle that, I'd be rich."

To Ken and Fara, the lizard-man said, "It is time for you to go."

"Not even a hint about the game?" Ken said.

The lizard-man unhooked two small steel boxes from its bandolier. It handed one to Ken and one to Fara. "Do not come back again," it said.

These folks drive a tough bargain, Ken thought. "You really liked the chessboard?" he asked.

"Go," said the lizard-man. It made a signal to one of its fellows, and just like that, Ken and Fara were standing in the woods behind Mystery Hill. Predawn mist wafted along the surface of the pond, and both of them shivered in the sudden chill. Ken's ears popped again.

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The disappearance of Little Boozy Boswell did not go unremarked. Nor did the fact that a 1982 Nissan B10 hatchback belonging to Vera of the Forked Tongue was found parked by Little Boozy's tea shack. Big Boozy was heard to say that his boy had run off with a crazy woman, which was all right with him since that's how he had come to be the father of Little Boozy in the first place. It was damn good, opined Big Boozy, that some families observed their traditions. He was looking forward to his first grandchild. The tea shack mysteriously burned to the ground about two weeks after Little Boozy and Vera vanished. Big Boozy blamed the local kids, and when he couldn't pin the crime on any of them and the insurance company refused to pay up, Ken figured this new grievance would keep the old man alive for another ten years.

Fara spent about six months trying to reverse-engineer the little steel boxes that had made the trip back with them, but it never worked. She stopped by every so often to take measurements and fiddle with the Lacoste, but as time went by, it became clear that the lizard-men had done something to interfere with her progress. She could still read the disturbances in the local gravity, but she couldn't send messages. "Those little bastards," she fumed.

"Well," Ken said, "they don't come here anymore." Which was true; he hadn't seen one since the night he'd gone to another universe. "And they didn't want us to come back anyway. What were you going to do, write a paper about them?"

On her last visit, Ken showed her the display area he'd built on the side of the barn to house his taxidermied lizard-men, with Boris and Bobby right up front. Hell with it, he figured; he had it right from the lizard-man's mouth that they liked the chessboard, and man, did the tourists eat the whole thing up. He sold postcards, T-shirts with lizard-men on them, the works. He'd even gritted his teeth and let Jamie put up a MySpace profile. Plus his minigolf course was in much better shape now that area teenagers were no longer communing with the lizard-men on the seventeenth green.

He told Fara all this while she was sitting in her car, about to leave, and she laughed at him. "Ken," she said, "you're the only sentimental tourist-trap shyster I know. The only one who loves the debunkers and the true believers equally. You were born to this."

Then she drove off, headed for a conference where she was going to present some results on her research into local fluctuations in gravity and

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their possible implications for the theory of strings, and he figured he'd never hear from her again. A slobberknocker of a girl, Ken thought. She gave him hope.

He turned back to regard his domain. Little kids were running around waving toy lizard-men that he'd just unboxed that morning. Their parents followed waving cameras and brochures. Older kids moved in herds across the minigolf course, taking pictures of each other and shrieking at the results. A recently arrived wacko was conducting some kind of occult experiment on the wavelength of sunlight near the plumb bob. Jamie looked harried at the ticket window; could be he was going to have to hire another sullen adolescent to deal with the swelling number of customers. Pretty good, Ken thought. On the other side, the lizard-men might be making a pile of money off Little Boozy and Vera, but right there and then, he was doing fine off them, too. He considered it a fair deal for everyone.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

AS THE DAYS SHORTEN here in the Northern Hemisphere, *F&SF* plans to bring readers lots of great fiction to brighten the days.

In our February issue, James L. Cambias gives us a charming tale of making a living out among the moons of Saturn. However, that description might be a bit misleading...but you'll have to wait until next month to read "Balancing Accounts" and see for yourself.

From Saturn to suburbia...in "Memoirs of the Witch Queen," Ron Goulart spins out a story of unusual doings in the quiet town of New Beckford, Connecticut. A humble writer named Paul Sanson finds his life turned upside-down when he takes on the job of polishing the memoirs of a local character. Is Easy Street one of the quiet lanes in this little town?

In the months ahead we've got lots of good tales planned, including a look at politics by Richard Bowes, a fable of the reconstruction from Albert E. Cowdrey, and a vintage space opera by Robert Reed. Other writers with stories in inventory include Al Michaud, M. Rickert, Richard Paul Russo, and James Stoddard. Subscribe now so you won't miss any of the fun!

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CURIOSITIES

HOW LIKE A GOD, BY REX STOUT (1929)

HERE'S ONE of the most bizarre fiction books ever written: unconventional in structure and in form as well as in premise. I say "fiction book" rather than "novel," because the chapters of *How Like a God* are interwoven with segments of a seemingly unrelated short story, and the threads unite only in the terrifying conclusion.

The short story, printed entirely in italics but otherwise told in conventional third-person narration, is divided into segments lettered *A* through *Q*. These reveal the thoughts of one Mr. Lewis as he ascends a staircase with a pistol in his coat pocket, intending to kill someone in an upstairs room. Lewis's sense of impending doom raises the possibility that perhaps his intent is not murder but rather suicide, or perhaps both.

Alternating between these brief cliffhanger segments are the long chapters I through XVI of a novel, in second-person narration. You are William Barton Sidney. Your entire existence, from childhood through sexual awakening into prosperous middle age, is recounted in these pages. Your life is respectable, normal, prosaic. Yet nobody suspects that you are aware of multiple personalities within your body, and that your head is full of voices.

The final segment *Q* is a chilling climax, revealing Lewis's intended prey (human in visage only), the true relationship between Lewis and Sidney, and the full significance of the novel's title (a quote from *Hamlet*). Can it be coincidence that Brenda Clough's 1997 SF novel *How Like a God* features a telepathic protagonist also named Lewis?

— F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

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He came like the wind,
like the wind touched everything, and like the wind was gone.

In Memoriam

JAMES OLIVER RIGNEY JR.—ROBERT JORDAN—
AUTHOR, FRIEND

1948-2007

Few in his generation have touched the lives of so many.
Far fewer still will go on touching lives for generations yet to come.

The Wheel of Time turns and ages come and pass,
leaving memories that become legend.

Fare you well Jim, from all of us at Tor.

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